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**Issued three times a year**

### **Subscriptions:**

€16 per year within Europe and the Middle East  
\$30 per year to the USA  
Individual copies 150 czk

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This periodical is indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database*® and it is also included in the full-text *ATLASerials*® (*ATLAS*®) collection. Both are products of the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606, USA  
email: [atla@atla.com](mailto:atla@atla.com), [www: http://www.atla.com](http://www.atla.com)

ISSN 1804 – 6444 (on line)

ISSN 1213 – 1520 (print)

Registration Number: MK ČR E 10511

**International Baptist Theological Seminary**  
of the European Baptist Federation, o.p.s.  
Nad Habrovkou 3, Jenerálka, Praha 6, CZ 164 00  
Czech Republic

IČO: 25741683

*Produced by the IBTS Journal Team*



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## Journal of European Baptist Studies

Volume thirteen

No. 1

September 2012

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## Editorial

We celebrate the launch of volume thirteen of this *Journal* by returning to an issue which has been reflected on several times over the past twelve years of our publication. A book review by Alex Alexander looks at *Multi-Voiced Church* by Stuart and Sian Murray-Williams. Stuart has been at the heart of reflection on what Anabaptism has to offer the European church today; Sian was on the staff of BMS World Mission and a colleague of mine when I served the British Baptist Union in the 1990s. She now lectures on worship at Bristol. Stuart and Sian's book addresses the reality of our baptistic tradition which theologically asserts that all the people of God should find a voice in the local church, especially in worship. Sadly, the reality is that in many baptistic churches the preacher and the worship band seem to reign supreme, denying the theology we espouse. In this continuing discussion about the shape of worship and who contributes to worship I reexamine some of my own earlier thoughts and throw them into the debate which I believe will take place around *Multi-Voiced Church*. Here I advocate a more significant place for community meals (echoing the Eucharist, Agape, Communion, Lord's Supper), to which the Murray-Williams' do not give much attention.

Luke Heidebrecht takes us into another prevalent concern of baptistic churches in Europe. His contribution to our *Journal* is not the usual article, but rather a diary of discovery as he visited Muslim communities in Bangladesh in company with David Shenk, an adjunct lecturer at IBTS and an expert on Christian-Muslim encounter. Here Luke is exposed to aspects of Islam which cause him to reflect, and this is Islam encountered in its own milieu. For many in the great cities of Europe the Christian Church is coming to terms with a large minority Islamic community within its midst. If we are to reject the bleak hypothesis of Samuel P. Huntington and his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Re-making of the World Order* and look more to the insights of David Shenk and to Duan Elmer in his *Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry*, we no doubt need a younger generation to be exposed to other cultures in the context where they are dominant in order to understand better how we can effectively engage in contextual missiology.

**The Revd Dr Keith G. Jones**  
Rector, IBTS

# Gathering Worship: Some tentative proposals for reshaping worship in our European Baptist Churches today

Keith G. Jones

## Introduction: What is the importance of this topic?

Whenever groups of baptistic<sup>1</sup> Christians meet at conferences or events in Europe<sup>2</sup> the topic of worship seems to arise. In some Christian communities the discussion becomes intense and, occasionally, inflamed to the point where some speak about ‘worship wars’ and others determine it is necessary to negotiate a maze of possibilities.<sup>3</sup> For many in the pews<sup>4</sup> the mode and form of worship has either become atrophied in a fixed style from the 1800s or become too post-modernist for many believers to be comfortable. Writing on the topic from a European baptistic perspective is limited (unlike in north America where there are several important authors at work<sup>5</sup>), but the essential nature of such worship, its theology, spirituality and shape has been set out in the writings of Christopher J. Ellis.<sup>6</sup> Chris Ellis has done an important task for the European baptistic community and his reflections are currently been explored and contextualised in other parts of Europe beyond the isles.<sup>7</sup> In this article I want to step to one side from the debate and from the helpful descriptive and instructional work of Ellis and others and propose a recovery of other insights which belong to a deeper concern to re-engage with the worship of the people of God as a

<sup>1</sup> In this article I use the words ‘baptistic’ and my preferred choice, ‘gathering’ to refer to those Christian communities formed and shaped by the radical reformation and which might be ecclesially described as gathering, intentional, convictional and missional communities. On this see my ‘Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*’ in the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, Volume four, Number 2, January 2004, pp 5-13.

<sup>2</sup> I do not define Europe narrowly as being the countries from the Atlantic to the Urals, from the North Cape to the Bosphorus, but also include those countries of central Asia and the eastern Mediterranean whose baptistic communities have been extensively influenced by the theology and ecclesiology of the historic European Reformation countries.

<sup>3</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *How shall we Worship? Biblical Guidelines for the Worship Wars* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2003), Paul Basden, *The Worship Maze: Finding a Style to fit your Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999), Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Sunday: Breakthrough ideas for Transforming Worship* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> I shall argue against pews at a later point, but in Europe the reality is that the majority of chapels, prayer houses and worship rooms are equipped with fixed pews facing a dominant pulpit or platform.

<sup>5</sup> Including Brad Berglund, Paul Basden, Sally Morgenthaler, William H. Willimon, Robert E. Webber, Mark D. Edwards, Elmer Towns and Marva J. Dawn.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004). See also his *Approaching God: A Guide for Worship Leaders and Worshippers* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Chris Ellis writes as a pastor within the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Following his lead, research and writing is taking place contextually on similar topics in Belarus, Russia and the Czech Republic.

communal, holistic and sensual reality which seeks to move beyond worship wars towards a recovery of an organic form of worship; and to promote a more baptistic worship vision which is not caught up in the model of ‘Word and Sacrament’ based on the Magisterial Reformation.<sup>8</sup>

First, I need to offer a few brief words about the ecclesial model I have earlier described as ‘baptistic’. In Europe there is a concern to develop a pan-European Protestant Community (CPCE),<sup>9</sup> but as a result of a dialogue between European Baptists and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe<sup>10</sup> between 2000-2005 it is clear that Baptists, as part of the family of baptistic communities, do not quite belong within the classic ‘Protestant’ churches of the Magisterial Reformation. Rather, we belong to a type of Christianity which has been variously described as the ‘fourth stream’ or the ‘pneumatic stream’ as espoused by the famous missiologist, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin in his book, *The Household of God* (1954).<sup>11</sup>

I am therefore working with a notion of four principal streams of Christian life and thought in the twenty-first century. These are:-

- Orthodox (the autocephalous community of Orthodox, Coptic and Apostolic churches);<sup>12</sup>
- Catholic (Roman and Uniate) together with the Episcopalians/Anglicans;<sup>13</sup>
- Magisterial Protestant – Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian;
- Pneumatic Christianity/believer’s church/ gathering churches/ baptistic churches.

It is about the worship of these churches in this fourth grouping that I am writing.<sup>14</sup> I have written previously on this topic, but in this article I

<sup>8</sup> By Magisterial Reformation I mean that associated with Luther, Zwingli and Calvin.

<sup>9</sup> The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, CPCE/GECE/CEPE, including Lutheran, Reformed, Hussite, Evangelical Brethren, Congregational and Methodist. This grouping is based around the Leuenberg Fellowship Agreement of 1973. See <http://www.leuenberg.eu/>, accessed 2 March 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Wilhelm Hüffmeier and A.A. Peck (eds.), *Dialogue Between the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe and the European Baptist Federation on the Doctrine and Practice of Baptism* (Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), p.88. Others use the title ‘Believers Church’. James Wm. McClendon Jnr. prefers ‘baptistic churches’ as espoused in his *Systematic Theology - Ethics, Doctrine, Witness* in three volumes. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986, 1994, 2000). My own descriptor is ‘Gathering Church’.

<sup>12</sup> The family of Orthodox Churches as territorial churches, claim to be the second largest Christian family with over 225 million infant-baptised members worldwide. They operate in a family of 17 autocephalous or self-governing churches. Cf: <http://www.ec-patr.org/patr.php?lang=en>, accessed 2 March 2012.

<sup>13</sup> On the Roman Catholic Church see [http://www.vatican.va/phome\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/phome_en.htm), accessed 2 March 2012. On the Anglican World Communion see <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/>, accessed 2 March 2012.

<sup>14</sup> I have written on this topic before, but within the constraints of the general Baptist and Anabaptist traditions. This article seeks to move beyond what I have written in ‘On Abandoning Public Worship’,

take my thinking further and update the references and insights to take account of more recent scholarship.<sup>15</sup> The other three groupings are well served by liturgists and scholars who seek to take their traditions and liturgy, comment on them and re-interpret them for Christian life in Europe in the twenty-first century.<sup>16</sup> However, it is my conviction that we lack a lively and informed dialogue for this fourth stream within our baptistic seminaries and communities in Europe today.

These gathering churches are constantly looking back to the church before the ‘Peace of the Church’ and the Edict of Milan.<sup>17</sup> As we live in twenty-first century Europe, I would argue that we perceive this as alien territory, as did the New Testament churches and the Anabaptists in their own time. Such communities of faith reject the old notions of territorial churches, despise hierarchical models of leadership and prefer not to elevate Tradition above experience, whilst seeking to be profoundly Christocentric.

There is an ongoing debate about the principal marks of these gathering churches, about which I have written provisionally elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Based on this notion, and with McClendon and his phrase ‘this is that and then is now’,<sup>19</sup> we are called to constantly reconfigure our worship around a Christocentric hub. We take seriously the life of the first gathering communities, which, according to Acts 2.47, met in houses<sup>20</sup> to worship around stories and meals in what might be considered to be porous worship where people were constantly being invited to taste and see what was going on rather than the public worship of Christendom or the private worship of an exclusive sect. I believe this has a resonance with those who formed

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Keith G. Jones and Parush R. Parushev (eds.), *Currents in Baptistic Theology of Worship Today* (Prague: IBTS, 2007) and ‘Anabaptist Mission Gathering Around the Table’ in Wilbert R. Shenk and Peter F. Penner (eds.), *Anabaptism and Mission* (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Keith G. Jones, ‘Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, Volume four, No. 2, January 2004, pp. 5-13. Jones, ‘Anabaptist Mission: Gathering Round the Table’, pp. 265-290.

<sup>16</sup> See classically such books as Duncan B. Forrester, J. Ian H. McDonald and Gian Tellini, *Encounter with God* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1999), which addresses such issues for Reformed and Episcopalian Churches in Scotland.

<sup>17</sup> The Edict of Milan, AD 313, proclaimed religious tolerance in both the western and eastern Roman Empires. The Emperor of the west, Constantine, went beyond tolerance to active promotion of Christianity which led to the concept of Christendom, or Christianity as the official religion of the Empire.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, ‘Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*’.

<sup>19</sup> McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, Ethics*, pp. 32-33, where he argues that baptistic churches live as if they are in New Testament times as much as possible.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Schmemann, the Orthodox liturgist, has written about these domestic churches. Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Press, 2003), pp. 19ff.

their churches during the radical reformation and may have a relevance in post Christendom Europe today.<sup>21</sup>

## What is worship?

Worship is a label that can be stuck on a list of activities. Some historic definitions from the catechisms begin with us, declaring that ‘Our chief purpose is to Worship God and enjoy him forever’.<sup>22</sup> This type of declaration places worship at the very forefront of our response to God. The biblical precedent for doing that is immense, both in the Old Testament (the Ten Commandments, Isaiah) and in the New, where Jesus, throughout the Gospels, treats the worship of God as a defining activity both for himself and his disciples.

If we assent to the declaration that when we respond in faith to God as a believer, our chief aim becomes that of worshipping the God whom we know in Jesus (nothing more and certainly nothing less), then this means the way we worship, the content and the attitude we have to worship is very important for gathering communities of faith. Indeed, it is foundational and demanding of serious reflection. It demands from us our very best and it carries about it something of a desire to please God, rather than to please our neighbours and ourselves (not that we should make the perverse and illogical jump that if we please God we cannot please our neighbours and ourselves).

Worship is generally assumed within the wider Christian Church by liturgists and theologians to be the expression in corporate gatherings of adoration, praise and thanksgiving to God in response to His activity in the Word and the world. This response precedes the pursuit of regulated doctrinal formulation in the New Testament churches, for the radical reformation churches and for gathering churches. Thus the focus on worship is a first-order activity before mission and doctrine. We may say that theology is a second-order activity when it refers to formal academic activity.<sup>23</sup> So the dismissal from corporate worship is the ejection of the

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<sup>21</sup> An interesting examination of such contextual issues in Scotland can be found in Duncan B. Forrester and Doug Gay (eds.), *Worship and Liturgy in context: Studies and Case Studies in Theology and Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Forrester, et al, *Encounter with God*.

<sup>23</sup> On primary and secondary theology see the writings of my colleague, Parush R. Parushev; most recently in ‘Baptistic Convictional Hermeneutics’, a chapter in Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (eds.), *The Plainly Revealed Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice*, The Watson-Brown Foundation, Inc. Endowed Series in Baptist Studies (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), pp. 172-190. See also ‘Doing Theology in a Baptist Way (Theologie op een baptistenmanier)’, in Teun van der Leer (ed.), *Zo zijn onze manieren! In Gesprek over gemeentetheologie*, *Baptistica Reeks* (Series), vol.1 (Barneveld, Nederland: Unie van Baptisten Gemeenten in Nederland, September 2009), pp. 7-22

believer to engage in orthopraxis and reflect on orthodoxy in her or his faith.<sup>24</sup>

This could be a contentious statement to some and one of the purposes of this article is to stimulate interaction and debate, but if worship offered to the triune God is the first and most natural action of the person of faith living in community, then it becomes the vehicle for our second leap into apologetics (declaring the faith within us) and mission (sharing the faith in word and deed).

Marva Dawn<sup>25</sup> argues that to worship God the Lord is – in the world’s eyes – a waste of time. She comments that it is ‘a *royal* waste of time’. It is *royal* for it immerses us in the regal splendour of the King<sup>26</sup> of the Cosmos. Worship ought not to be construed in a utilitarian way. Its purpose is not to gain numbers nor for our churches to be seen to be successful. This is a statement which could be seen over against the perceived norms of many baptistic communities in Europe today. With Marva Dawn I want to affirm that the entire reason for our worship is that God deserves it (and here there is an implicit challenge to those theologies of mission which want to use worship principally as a vehicle for outreach<sup>27</sup>). Worship focused on outreach might be a helpful form of pre-evangelism, as with Paul on Mars Hill,<sup>28</sup> rather than worship in the home of Lydia<sup>29</sup> or the synagogue at Capernaum, or later in Christendom: the Basilica in Alexandria.<sup>30</sup>

## Experienced worship

For the purpose of this article I do not wish to engage in a historical recounting of catholic and orthodox Christian worship, nor trace the development of baptistic worship from the Anabaptists, through the radical

and footnotes on pp. 66-75. More specifically ‘primary’ (or ‘lived out’) and ‘secondary’ (academic) theological language.

<sup>24</sup> On orthodoxy, orthopraxy, orthohexy and orthopyre see Jones ‘Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional, *Koinonia*’, pp 5-13. Also John H.Y. Briggs (ed.), *A Dictionary of European Baptist Life and Thought* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), p. 371.

<sup>25</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal ‘Waste’ of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, MC: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Here I would prefer to use gender inclusive language regarding God, but Marva, herself, uses the male form.

<sup>27</sup> An example of contemporary ‘Mars Hill’ mission might be <http://willowcreek.org/>, accessed 2 March 2012. This is not to make any comment on the ministry of Willowcreek, but rather to observe that it is working to a completely different model of church and worship to that argued for here.

<sup>28</sup> Acts 17.22.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 16.40.

<sup>30</sup> Alexandria claims to be one of the four great episcopal sees of the early church, founded by Mark the Evangelist c42AD. Amongst noted patriarchs are the theologians Athanasius (328-339) and Cyril (412-444).

gathering communities of faith to the myriad forms of worship practised by the pneumatic churches in the world today.<sup>31</sup> Rather, I want to argue a case for a model of gathering church worship focused on breaking open the Word and eating a meal. As application is key to this approach then I take my thirteen years of experience of worship at IBTS<sup>32</sup> and, to a lesser extent, in the Sbor Bratrské jednoty baptistů v Praze 6 - Šárka Valley Community Church.<sup>33</sup> From this experiential approach I will, at times, move back to underlying principles and make a comment on the twists and turns of history. I will comment on objections to some aspects of worship which certain baptistic communities are prone to, but hopefully this approach will provide a way for readers to engage with local church experiences and reflect upon these important issues.<sup>34</sup>

So, I have argued that worship is foundational for gathering, or baptistic, churches and now I wish to propose that worship must be built around cycles. This point was disputed by the Puritans who argued that every Lord's Day and every weekday should be seen as the same, in which the whole testimony of God should be affirmed.<sup>35</sup> I believe this is untrue to creation and human nature – the way God formed us – and to the witness of the Bible. Rather, I propose<sup>36</sup> that for gathering churches there is a cycle of worship which has two focal points. These are not dramatic and original to me; rather, they were developed in the first centuries of Christianity, but a rediscovery of them within the gathering church tradition is overdue:

- The pattern of the week starting with the day of Resurrection (Sunday). This change from the focus of the week being the day of rest, the Sabbath, in Judaism, to the Day of Resurrection (Sunday), from the early years of the New Testament Church may be taken by us as a matter of course, but it is worth reflecting that some communities of believers such as the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Seventh Day Baptists<sup>37</sup> (still strong in Australia and some other parts of the world) hold with the Old Testament injunction to keep the Sabbath as a Holy Day and Day of Rest – moving to a climax of worship at the end

<sup>31</sup> On Baptist worship see Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition*.

<sup>32</sup> The International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague, Czech Republic, where I have been Rector since 1998.

<sup>33</sup> Where I have been a member since 1999 and more recently a co-moderator with Lina Andronovienė and Gregory L. Nichols; see [www.svcc.cz](http://www.svcc.cz).

<sup>34</sup> I believe it is paramount for baptistic communities to reflect together on their worship experiences.

<sup>35</sup> This Puritan attitude has certainly been carried over into many Baptist churches and leads to a flat, monochrome approach to worship which is increasingly rejected by the young in our post-modern world.

<sup>36</sup> Of course, this is not an original notion to me. Indeed, it ought not to be, if I am being faithful to the view of McClendon that 'this is that and then is now'.

<sup>37</sup> See <http://www.seventhdaybaptist.org/>, accessed 2 March 2012.

of the cycle, rather than the Resurrection model that on the Lord's Day we launch ourselves into a new cycle in Word and Meal.<sup>38</sup>

- This pattern of communal worship on the Lord's Day, Day of Resurrection, is extended to include a daily cycle of morning worship which sees the accent on the beginning of each new day of work and study. At IBTS we always share in a community Eucharistic meal on Wednesday.<sup>39</sup> Of course, many Christian communities also conclude the day of work and activity with a preparation for sleep – often called a service of Vespers or Compline, one of the daily cycle of worship events from the monastic tradition (and indeed the seminary where I trained<sup>40</sup> built the day around three acts of worship at 08.30, 17.00 and 21.30, not quite as demanding as the eight traditional offices of monastic life – nocturns, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, compline).
- The second focal point is the annual cycle of worship<sup>41</sup> where many gathering churches have adopted the pattern of the majority of Christian Churches. The argument for use of such an approach, alien to many Baptist churches trapped in a Puritan model, is that, used consistently, with an Old Testament lesson, Psalm, Epistle and Gospel, over a three-year period we are exposed to the 'whole counsel of God'<sup>42</sup> and not just to the favourite red-letter passages of the stated preacher. I leave to one side the problematic issues of the calendar and the difference in celebrations and feast days between east and west which is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>43</sup> Here, I argue, that there is deep value in gathering

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<sup>38</sup> For Baptists in countries that were part of the former Soviet bloc, Monday is considered to be the first day of the week. In such circumstances believers often do not think of Sunday as the first day of the week, so they actually have an Old Testament sabbatarian approach.

<sup>39</sup> The frequency of celebrating the meal or Eucharist, is a matter of strong debate. It cannot be explored adequately here but see my 1998 Whitley Lecture, *A Shared Meal and a Common Table: Some Reflections on the Lord's Supper and Baptists* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> The Northern Baptist College, Manchester, now the Northern Baptist Learning Community. This model no longer pertains there as they have moved to other models of ministerial formation. For contemporary gathering church communities working with three times of prayer a day see the Northumbria Community, [www.northumbriacomunity.org](http://www.northumbriacomunity.org), accessed 19 March 2012.

<sup>41</sup> See the ecumenical Revised Common Lectionary for how themes are worked out in scripture. This represents work carried out by the majority of Christian World Communions and, though nuanced in different ecclesial traditions, is extensively used by local ecclesial communities across the world <http://www.englishtexts.org/what.html>, accessed 2 March 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Which should be vital for a family of churches claiming to place a high regard for the centrality of scripture in its common life, but my own experience is that many such churches fail to have an adequate diet of scripture in worship.

<sup>43</sup> A friend of mine was once asked to serve as the Baptist representative on a group seeking to reconcile the churches of the east and the west to establish a common date for Easter. Sadly, this is one of those fruitless tasks which we cannot expect to be reconciled this side of the parousia.

churches shaping their worship around an annual cycle<sup>44</sup> which enables a richness to be embedded in the liturgy:<sup>45</sup>

Creation – September;<sup>46</sup>

God and his dealings with the Hebrew people – October/November;

Advent (anticipation of Christ's birth) – four weeks in December;

Epiphany (seeing the manifestations of God) – January;

Lent (taking on spiritual disciplines as preparation) – February/March;

Holy Week (Palm Sunday to Good Friday) – March/April;

Easter (which declares our faith experientially) – March/April;

Ascension (Christ ascends the throne with the Creator) – May/June

Pentecost (the Holy Spirit<sup>47</sup> is given to the churches) – May/ June

The Mission of the Church<sup>48</sup> – July/August.

As I suggested earlier, the fault made by the Puritan reformers may have been to abandon notions of the Christian cycle and assume that every day in our lives could be experienced as a day of resurrection. As an ideal it seems fine, but for most of us we move through varying moods and experiences as part of the reality of living and the needs of our bodies. We deny something about our own experience of the Grace of God if all our worship is, for instance, praise, and there is no confession, intercession, reflection. We also cannot survive as believers if all we ever do is confess our unworthiness and sing the songs of lament. In each of the cycles: annual, weekly, daily (and within the context of the principal act of worship of the community of believers – whether on Resurrection Day or, as with IBTS, the Wednesday Eucharistic<sup>49</sup> Feast), the needs and hopes of the

<sup>44</sup> For purposes of this article I work with the contemporary western calendar. I recognise that gathering churches in Orthodox countries follow an older calendar with variants for Advent, Christmas and Easter.

<sup>45</sup> By liturgy I simply imply that worship should have a shape and form. I believe Acts 2.47 gives us insights into this and I am disturbed by the way many baptistic Christians expunge such words and ideas from their vocabulary and thought.

<sup>46</sup> Baptistic churches often have a poor understanding and theology of creation. I believe Orthodoxy has much to teach us in this regard. For resources see John Weaver and Margot R. Hodson (eds.), *The Place of Environmental Theology: A Guide for seminaries, colleges and universities* (Prague: IBTS, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> For a recent and helpful exposition of the Holy Spirit for Gathering Churches see Molly T. Marshall's three articles in *Baptistic Theologies*, Volume 3, No.2, Autumn 2011 (Prague: IBTS), pp. 1-45.

<sup>48</sup> See Helen Cameron, *Resourcing Mission: Practical Theology for Changing Churches* (London: SCM Press, 2010), which offers a useful guide to the local outworking of a mission strategy for gathering churches.

<sup>49</sup> I use the word 'Eucharist' as a challenge to gathering churches. It is a good New Testament word: 'thanksgiving', and so often this element is lacking in our table fellowship. The words Communion and Lord's Supper also have their place, but I am concerned at the dour and joyless participation in the table meal which infects so many Baptist churches. See my 1998 Whitley Lecture, *A Shared Meal and a Common Table*.

whole of the body<sup>50</sup> and the whole of each person within the body must be capable of finding a resonance and an opportunity given for the connection to be made between our humanity and the transcendence of our Gracious God. It is the strong proposal of this article that such an attitude is not prevalent amongst us and it needs to be if we are to be a missional people in the twenty-first century.

## The concept of worship in the context of society

Let us engage with the reality that Christian people worship. For most people, gathering community worship is expressed in some form of ritual. Beyond Christianity ritual, in some way or other, is an important element in their lives. People may not recognise that worship expresses the meaning they find in life, and offers consolation, encouragement and challenge. All societies find that people need to mark the significant moments of experience – birth, death, marriage, special days in society, remembering the dead of wars and conflicts, university graduations and the like. Our worship relates to belief and meaning and also to practice and social order. So we need to be concerned in our thinking and talking about the interaction between worship, which is itself a form of practice,<sup>51</sup> and Christian belief and practice.

We cannot understand the life of the community of Christian disciples without reference to worship. Worship must be understood as *participation* by all rather than only as observation or contemplation. In worship God is encountered and glorified, God's purposes are discerned (however faintly) and God's people are nourished and strengthened for service. Worship is not just a part of Christian practice, but is at the centre without which everything else falls apart. It is something that we do together, not watch or have done to us! In making this affirmation I testify to my experience at Šárka Valley Community Church (SVCC),<sup>52</sup> where the majority of members share in the construction and development of worship. Sometimes, we have at least two leaders and a person who breaks open the word,<sup>53</sup> together with others who read the scriptures and many who pray in times of free prayer and in a host of languages. It is a calling for the whole community and is offered by women and men without the erection of

<sup>50</sup> Here I use the Pauline language of the Church as the 'body of Christ'. Such language helps us in developing embodied, holistic worship.

<sup>51</sup> The idea of practices which are deep and meaningful belongs to the philosophy of Alasdair McIntyre in, for instance *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

<sup>52</sup> On SVCC see <http://www.svcc.cz/>, accessed 2 March 2012.

<sup>53</sup> I prefer this term to the more usual 'sermon' which belongs to other traditions, especially the Magisterial Reformation churches who assume only the educated and godly pastor can have this responsibility. In the Anabaptist and Radical Reformation traditions we look for as many believers as possible to share insights and help us to see how the Word of God can be understood in the community.

fences of exclusion.<sup>54</sup> It is, in my experience, in sharp contrast to worship I have experienced in many Baptist and free churches over forty years,<sup>55</sup> where the Magisterial Reformation model often holds sway, with leadership confined to a (male) pastor and musical contributions often focused on a choir.<sup>56</sup>

## Worship and community

So, I emphasise that for gathering churches, worship is first of all a communal activity of the people of God. There are derived forms of worship which take the insights of the communal and apply them to the individual, but the danger for some is that we work the other way round and take our private devotion – ‘My God and I’ as the model for communal acts of worship. Even when we pray on our own, there is a proper understanding that says we are praying with the church. Worship is activity in community with the church, not a spectator sport, nor a private hobby.<sup>57</sup>

Today we need worship which has character and depth and builds on the earliest traditions of Christian home worship, over against the traditionalism of many Baptist groups in Europe. Worship begins with two foundational ingredients – the *ekklesia* (or assembly) and the *koinonia* (communion/fellowship). The *ekklesia* met in two places in the early years of the believers – the Temple or Synagogue and the Domus, the home.<sup>58</sup> These two places were fused together in the early years of the *ekklesia* and the different worship of both places was combined into the one liturgy. The service of the Word and the intercessions developed from the worship of the Synagogue. The Eucharistic meal developed from the pattern of the special meals in the Upper Room, at Emmaus, and by the lakeside; those that had been shared during the years of the ministry of Jesus.

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<sup>54</sup> The New Testament seems to know no bounds within the first house churches; the Anabaptists looked for gifting of individuals; but many Baptists have sadly erected non-scriptural barriers to participation, alongside applying a faulty hermeneutic to Pauline texts on women exercising their gifts in communal worship.

<sup>55</sup> Stuart and Sian Murray-Williams, *Multi-voiced church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012).

<sup>56</sup> As noted earlier, this service of ‘Word and Sacrament’ has its legitimacy and is at the heart of CPCE church life, but I believe it is not the model for gathering churches.

<sup>57</sup> This is not to argue against private prayer, simply to assert that it is a derived form from porous worship. On such individual prayer see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1954); translated from German, *Gemeinsames Leben* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1949).

<sup>58</sup> Acts 2. 42-47. Michael H. Taylor, *Variations on a Theme* (London: Galliard, 1973), p. 13.

## On gathering, intentional, convictional communities of faith

Let me turn from a view of the primacy of worship for Christians, and open up some concerns about what communities look like when they engage in such worship. It seems that the first communities of those who were disciples of, and witnesses to, Jesus, cohered around a Christo-centric affirmation that 'Jesus is Lord'.<sup>59</sup> They met in a variety of places; but as I have argued elsewhere<sup>60</sup> essentially they were communities of believers operating within a domestic, rather than a public world. At the Radical Reformation their successors did not inherit the great cathedrals and town churches that existed,<sup>61</sup> but rather utilised homes, bakeries, warehouses and the open fields to gather for worship.

These New Testament-type communities understood themselves to be open to how the spirit of God might move them on in their discipleship. They also strove to be, as it were, porous at the edges as people came in touch with them and wanted to know more about the Christ,<sup>62</sup> yet, nevertheless the worshipping core of the church was very intentional. For our communities worshipping today this is important as we see how such churches are trying to be authentic, alternative, cultural models against the predominant individualism and hedonistic lifestyle promoted in Europe by the media and popular culture. The porosity and openness of the community in worship and in life must not be achieved at the expense of denying the need for a core of those in the church who are very committed to each other.<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, as I have argued elsewhere, these gathering churches function with the correct dynamics if they are small, porous communities.<sup>64</sup> Such communities are against the trend of the public mega churches – purpose driven, web sites telling all, large and complicated multi-generational programmes;<sup>65</sup> churches, in effect, operating firmly with the

<sup>59</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

<sup>60</sup> Jones, 'Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*', p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> A possible exception to this, at least on a temporary basis, might be Balthasar Hubmaier in Mikulov, where the whole town became Anabaptist for a period after 1526. See my *Anabaptists in Bohemia and Moravia from 1520 until the Battle of Bila Horá* (unpublished seminar paper).

<sup>62</sup> See, for instance Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church: Free State* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005).

<sup>63</sup> Various people are working with these concepts in creating new communities of faith. See, for instance Stuart Murray and Anne Wilkinson-Hayes, *Hope from the Margins: New Ways of Being Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2000).

<sup>64</sup> Whilst this might be the norm for an ecclesia, the interdependent nature of these ecclesia does not rule out larger occasional gatherings for worship and celebration, though the normal community for worship should be the smaller covenanted ecclesia.

<sup>65</sup> Here I offer an alternative to Brian Winslade, *A New Kind of Baptist Church: Reforming Congregational Government for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Macquarie Park, New South Wales: Morling Press, 2010), who advocates larger Baptist churches with multiple staff who lead in decision-making.

Christendom model that the church society, or village, is an all-embracing public community, requiring to operate as part of the infrastructure of urban society,<sup>66</sup> offering many services and ministries. Nor am I advocating the so-called cell church model,<sup>67</sup> which still works on the basis of the 'large' church with smaller ecclesial-like cells. The basic unit of ecclesiology in which worship is offered for a gathering church has to be small enough for real *koinonia*. This 'large' model was developed during the expansive years of the nineteenth century when the accent was on clubs and societies as models of human community.<sup>68</sup> It has, I believe, atrophied in post-Christendom Europe and may well be a barrier to effective worship and witness.<sup>69</sup>

The gathering *koinonia* will be communities of the street corners, of the side streets and apartment blocks, of the corner shop and the corner pub. When the numbers begin to grow, then these interdependent communities will break apart to create new gathering churches round the corner and down the street, adjacent to the next hypermarket or local kindergarten.<sup>70</sup>

Of course, such gathering churches need an ecclesial form and some description of belief and lifestyle which arises out of their worship, wherein will be found their primary theology. They will be communities who intend to live, as best they are able, in continuity with the original groups of believers.<sup>71</sup>

## Private, public or porous worship?

I have tried to establish a basic scenario. I am placing worship at the heart of what a gathering or believing community does.<sup>72</sup> It has an intensity and

<sup>66</sup> My colleague, Parush R. Parushev, asserts that these large churches are not really 'churches' at all, but villages.

<sup>67</sup> I recognise that some scholars observe that the Celtic Church and John Wesley used the idea of the 'cell', or Class Meeting, to good effect. However, I contend that this is not an effective way of promoting the model I am advocating here. In the cell, reliance is still placed on the larger body with traditional leadership or 'episcope' to provide the authentic ecclesial reality.

<sup>68</sup> So many free churches are thought to be failing today because they do not have choirs, Sunday school, youth clubs, various societies, women's meetings, men's meetings, etc. With my model, such things are not only unnecessary, they are inappropriate to the gathering church which focuses on one intentional meeting for *koinonia*.

<sup>69</sup> But for another view see Winslade, *A New Kind of Baptist Church*.

<sup>70</sup> For some other examples, see Murray and Wilkinson-Hayes, *Hope from the Margins*.

<sup>71</sup> Here, I am not arguing for the Tradition, but for that constant searching after the wider and deeper vision that 'then is now' and that though there is no simple or easy correlation, the struggle to understand the story and be faithful in discipleship guards against losing touch with the core of orthodox and orthopractic Christianity as it has been believed over 2000 years. See McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Doctrine*, especially p. 468ff, and churchly practise, pp. 316ff and 374-85.

<sup>72</sup> See, for instance Ellis, *Gathering - A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in the Free Church Tradition*.

purpose in telling and re-telling the narrative about Jesus and in offering a deep response to the goodness of God. The core members of the community are intimately related to one another as sisters and brothers in Jesus and this is only possible by knowing Christ and by knowing one another thoroughly in a covenanted relationship around a set of convictions and practices which includes a profound sense of *koinonia*.

No doubt some are already saying, ‘well, these sound like communities of religious – the monastic communities of the medieval period’ and I readily acknowledge that. It can be argued that, through the history of Christian communities, there have always been movements for radical reform which have sought to try to get back to some roots and insights which they feel draw them closer to the first and second generations of believers. Here we need a better developed biblical understanding of *koinonia*, which is not intense and restrictive in its formulations – an Old Testament rule-based approach – but rather a Christ-centred relational-base and that does not permit contemporary gathering churches to opt for private worship.

## **Architecture is crucial to gathering church worship**

Let us try, by a simple case study, to abandon the Constantinian notion of public worship in favour of porous worship. Let me describe and illustrate three contemporary worship spaces.<sup>73</sup> These are spaces which we can visit today and find being used for Christian worship and where those offering worship would claim to be doing so in spirit and in truth and, though with nuances on the theological model, to the ‘Glory of God’.

### **• The Gothic Cathedral**

In Europe we see the true magnificence of architecture in the immense cathedrals often built over hundreds of years to the ‘Glory of God’. They are intended to be public buildings – part of the civic built environment – giving testimony in the skill of craftsmen, artists, architects and builders to the amazing bounty and creativity of our God’s creation. These things can, and do, inspire us with the *mysterium tremendum* and we see how the simple square domestic ecclesia of the first two centuries was transformed into the public space – the Basilica, after the Edict of Milan; how the shape was modified to reflect architecturally that powerful Christian symbol of the cross; how the interior was divided into space for particular dramatic actions with the creation of a professional priestly or worship leading cast.

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<sup>73</sup> For an accessible history of Christian architecture see Nigel Yates, *Liturgical space: Christian worship and Church Buildings in Western Europe 1500-2000* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

Such buildings are immense, imposing and magnificent and dominate the skylines of most European cities.<sup>74</sup>

Today, this style is mimicked in part, not least in Russia and the Ukraine, where large imposing buildings with stained glass, spires and towers are erected by Baptists and other evangelicals with a desire to prove they have ‘arrived’ in the public space, just as surely as the Orthodox, Catholics and Lutherans before them. Such buildings have their place, but they inevitably produce a formal, limited participation, highly liturgical style of worship.

- ***The Preaching Station of the Dissenters***

Charles Haddon Spurgeon conducted a campaign against this sense of numinous, the grandeur of liturgical theatre, with his accent on the Word to be preached, and he looked away from the cathedral model and went back to the age of rhetoric and the buildings of Graeco-Roman society. So, the home he designed, the Metropolitan Tabernacle<sup>75</sup> in London is, externally, a Greek temple and, internally, an oratory – with large pulpit, minuscule table and the accent on the listeners being able to have a good view – by galleries and raked seating – of the preacher in full flow. This promotes a service focused on the sermon,<sup>76</sup> on the power of the dominant pastor-orator and the passive inferior listening of the congregation. This has been adopted by many Baptist churches as the norm of design for public worship.

- ***The Supermarket, Warehouse or Local Authority Clinic***

The third style is the utilitarian, built to provide dry space and to meet a clear purpose, but not needing in any way to express that purpose architecturally – or, at least, the architect and builders are given no money to do it!

The finest example I know is the ‘Abundant Life Church’<sup>77</sup> in Bradford, West Yorkshire. They bought an off-the-shelf design for a modern industrial warehouse. They had it built in an inner city regeneration zone and got a grant from Bradford City Council for the erection of a modern utility warehouse building. In fact, as a large community church they decided they needed a nondescript space easily blacked out where they

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<sup>74</sup> St Vitus Cathedral in Prague, for instance, was begun in 1344 on the instructions of King Charles IV by Matthew of Arras. It was not completed until 1929.

<sup>75</sup> On the spirituality of C.H. Spurgeon see Peter J. Morden and his Hughey Lectures, 2010, in *Baptistic Theologies*, Volume 4, No. 1, Spring 2012 (Prague: IBTS).

<sup>76</sup> In Russia, Belarus and the Ukraine often three sermons – the final one by the senior pastor being intended to ‘correct’ the earlier offerings by more junior colleagues.

<sup>77</sup> See [www.alm.org.uk](http://www.alm.org.uk), accessed 9 March 2012.

could build a large platform for the worship group and, just as importantly, easily install video screens, projectors and the like for multi-media worship. Their specification was not about design quality to glorify God, or good sight lines so the preacher can be seen, but adequate conduits to take cabling for the sound, visual and music systems, and any new 'shed' will do for that.

Architecturally, each of these three styles (and most of our Baptist buildings fall into one of these categories today<sup>78</sup>) makes claim about public worship and about the style and content of public worship. I would claim that buildings are a good way to begin to reflect on what people actually *believe* about the worship of God and about the real *life* of the church.

Each style can tell us something, but my argument is that there are architectural problems with each for gathering, convictional communities of faith and they inhibit another approach to worship which I want to explore. So, let us walk past the Gothic cathedral, give the rhetoric house a miss and avoid the functional warehouse or supermarket, on our way to the Upper Room.<sup>79</sup>

## Gathering intimately in the Upper Room

In so far as possible, I want to jump across these predominant architectural styles to the New Testament and the next generation of gathering churches. I refer here to the 'Upper Room' style of worship and the domesticity of first century Christianity where the image of the Last Supper and the descent of the Holy Spirit have a major, but not exclusive part to play in the *domus ecclesiae*, as Schmemann reminds us.<sup>80</sup> He comments that 'from the very beginning [of Christianity] we can see an obvious, undoubted triunity of the *assembly*, the *eucharist* and the *Church*'.<sup>81</sup> The building exists to be a home, a refuge, a place of gathering, intimately but not exclusively. It is a private space which permits guests (thus my notion of 'porosity'), certainly in Mediterranean style, where the dining room was generally the largest in the home, but it is clearly not a part of formal civic society.

A key feature is eating, and so the space for dining – in that society the largest room in the house – is pleasant, important and a focus of the

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<sup>78</sup> Some might argue we do not have the large cathedral structures, but this is to ignore buildings like the Church of the Redeemer in Birmingham, Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, or recent buildings erected in places such as Bryansk in south west Russia.

<sup>79</sup> Though having a different theological premise, Peter F. Smith addressed some similar questions in the 1970s. Peter F. Smith, *Third Millennium Churches* (London: Galliard, 1972).

<sup>80</sup> Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Press, 2003), p. 19ff.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

communal life of the household. As it is a home, things are intended to be particular and specific in decoration and furnishing. Homes are comfortable, warm in winter, cool in summer. Homes can often be crowded when the extended family is there, or friends and neighbours call round. However, a truly welcoming home always is, as it were, no private enclave, nor public space, but a place of *koinonia*, of porous community with a purpose.

## The centrality of meals

Now I turn to the work of Denis Smith (Disciples of Christ) and Hal Taussig (Methodist).<sup>82</sup> They have sought to explore the social nature of the feasts of the New Testament to existing ‘public’ worship. Smith and Taussig properly place the meals at the heart of community worship, reminding us of all the meal-tradition moments – wedding feasts, banquets, lakesides, and then with Paul in Antioch, at Corinth and, of course, moving on into trying to set things down in the Didache. Smith and Taussig look at the Gospel material in what is often referred to as ‘Q’ and see how ‘the meals define boundaries – inclusion and exclusion are given special emphasis as meal ideology was utilised to give cohesion and self-identity to the group as well as to provide ways to legitimise the inclusion of controversial new people’.<sup>83</sup>

The more I have reflected on all of this the more I have come to the conclusion, which is against much Baptist tradition, that the meal – or better, banquet, (in the sense of it taking time and being important) – is a key Gospel insight and perhaps presents a fresh way of thinking about our communal worship. The stories of inclusion and exclusion are about the willingness of people to come – people of the street and sinners – rather than the careful planning of the invited guests, who make their excuses and decline. So the events are not ‘private’, but nor are they ‘public’. They are for those who are attracted to Jesus, and those who see how the meal fellowship is breaking down boundaries between Greek and Roman, Jew and Samaritan, upright citizen and downright sinner – they are porous!

The discussion about porosity is missional and cannot detain us indefinitely here. However, Smith and Taussig are very taken with the idea of Jesus banqueting with sinners and drunkards – non-religious folks over against the formally invited, but full of excuses, religious types. Here are two short parables simply to set you thinking.

<sup>82</sup> Dennis E. Smith and Hal E. Taussig, *Many Tables: The Eucharist in the New Testament and Liturgy Today* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

- El Cordero de Dios Baptist Church, San Roce, San Salvador, started Sunday morning Eucharist with breakfast, when everyone brought along what they could. One of the older members, Lucy, a street sweet seller, had a ministry to prostitutes – talking and befriending them. Some came to worship and to the breakfast. When it came to the time to break the bread of life, the prostitutes, abused women, had a special ministry to serve the bread to those assembled.<sup>84</sup>
- Šárka Valley Community Church (ŠVCC) supports a ministry to the homeless on the streets of Prague. It is focused on providing hot drinks and nourishment with a very simple message about the love of God: ‘Jesus loves you’. A monthly agape meal<sup>85</sup> is a focus of the ministry of ŠVCC where bread is shared and wine drunk. The children of the church have a special privilege of dipping the bread into milk and honey – an arabon<sup>86</sup> of the community of faith they might one day join.

Creating true *koinonia*, true intention is foundational. The meal as practised was about bonding the community together. In adapting this tradition, differing communities (Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth) were responding to specific aspects of their own social situations and were doing so using ‘ritual’ language that was especially meaningful in their culture. This process can therefore be proposed as *primary* to the early developments in Christian meal liturgy.<sup>87</sup>

## Going back to our roots

Here is another way into worship, a first and second generation way. What happens if we take this primary way of looking at liturgy and start the modelling process again, rather than engage with the Magisterial Reformation approach with its accent on the Word proclaimed by the scholar-pastor.

Let us take this idea of the centrality of the community meal in the home for our worship. Let us take note of the strictures of Smith and Taussig that each community took the central ideas and developed them contextually and let us see where it takes us. Let us read, with Peter Smith,<sup>88</sup> issues about space so that we have a proper worship space around

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<sup>84</sup> El Cordero De Dios Baptist Church has had a significant ministry in El Salvador over many years. It has a vibrant partnership with Didcot Baptist Church in Oxfordshire, England.

<sup>85</sup> This falls short of my argument in this article for weekly table worship, but it is a sign of what is possible as a start.

<sup>86</sup> Arabon – a promise, a sign of what lies ahead.

<sup>87</sup> Smith and Taussig, *Many Tables: The Eucharist in the New Testament and Liturgy Today*, p. 69.

<sup>88</sup> Smith, *Third Millennium Churches*.

the important things – gathering, not formularised; community, not coercion.

The first thing is clear enough – Christian tradition, especially post Milan, reduced the meal to a preliminary and a penultimate event – seven actions to four.<sup>89</sup> Taking the centre out of the cake we create what might be understood as a ‘donut liturgy’ with a hole in the middle – the breaking of the bread and the final cup of blessing. The meal – the banquet, disappears. We know how it has tried to make a come-back at various points in history, for example, the agape meal with fruit cake and water of the Wesleys.<sup>90</sup> If we are to have true, authentic gathering worship we have to ask ourselves about whether we ought to restore the meal – a primary applied theology of the New Testament – to the heart of the worship of the gathering communities.

Of course, the Pauline warnings to the Corinthians<sup>91</sup> always come to mind and we ought to heed them. In a world of great need we do not want to turn worship into an orgy. However, to turn the four actions<sup>92</sup> of the Eucharist back into the original setting of the meal would again take hold of this New Testament reality that the event itself was about building, not only worship, but the community of worship, the eucharistic community, the community of thanksgiving.

Here I argue that there is a reasoned New Testament stand against the public worship of the cathedral, the hall of rhetoric or the supermarket shell, and also against private worship – by which we mean the closed worship of the monastic orders or the closed worship of the Strict Brethren. In our gathering communities I propose porous table worship. By this I mean in the pattern of the parables and meals of Jesus where some who think they are in are out and some who think they are out are in. There are no deep and strict rules, only that those gathering should be fascinated by the focus of the worship – Christ Jesus – and desire to be drawn into that deeper community of intention which is ever thankful for Christ and his life. As my colleague, David Holeton says:

The Eucharistic feast has its origins in the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples. This is to be understood in the larger framework of Jesus’ previous meals with disciples and others, and of the Risen Christ breaking bread with his disciples on the first day of the

<sup>89</sup> Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, A and C Black, 1945), pp. 48ff.

<sup>90</sup> Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians developed the idea of the Agape, or Love Feast, which Wesley introduced to Methodism having travelled with the Moravians. Wesleyan Methodists tended to use fruit cake and water for the feast, though I am advocating the restoration of a full meal.

<sup>91</sup> 1 Corinthians 11.23-34.

<sup>92</sup> On the church reducing the seven actions of Jesus to four, see Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, chapter IV.

week. As Jesus' table fellowship with all sorts and conditions of humanity was a sign of the in-breaking of the reign of God, so too eating and drinking in the fellowship of the community is a sign of the contemporary community's participation in this reign of God.<sup>93</sup>

## The content of porous, table, eucharistic worship

The New Testament makes some things clear – variety is in order in the *bene esse* of worship. There are different features at different tables and so we are free to construct our own table in a contextual way. It is not required that we wash the feet of all who enter to remove the dust and sand from them, and yet the Gospel of John<sup>94</sup> uses this powerful imagery to make clear this is a worship which involves respect and service to those who come, especially from those who dare, in some way, to preside at the feast. McClendon,<sup>95</sup> in his order for Eucharistic worship, is very taken with the Johannine imagery and advocates a reintroduction of foot washing and having, as Eucharistic clothing, a type of apron in white with which to dry the feet and accentuate the visual imagery of service. He, of course, makes the obvious point that the meal is a weekly event and not a monthly or occasional event, and I agree with him. Gathering communities of faith meet around the table, not primarily the pulpit.

The worship space centres around this focus of the table. I do not want to get hung up on issues of size of table and how many people can sit round it<sup>96</sup> – this meal has its roots in the banquet imagery of the first century of our common era, where people lounged around in the area – but that there should be a gathering around the table and no-one should be impeded from the table by 'fences' (*a la* the Orthodox and Catholics) or by 'functionaries' (*a la* the Presbyterians, Lutherans and the Methodists) is very important. This seems a basic of true gathering porous worship.

The worship should hold together the narrative, the prayers and the meal. The actualities of this – the worship room and the ordinary resurrection bread – are crucial.<sup>97</sup> We should eat bread which we might share as the stuff of life, but certainly leavened, risen bread as Christ's resurrection people. And the cup of blessing should surely be a single cup filled with the best products of the local vineyard. Living on an estate

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<sup>93</sup> David R. Holeton (ed.), *Renewing the Anglican Eucharist: Findings of the Fifth International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, Dublin, Eire, 1995* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1996).

<sup>94</sup> John 13. 2-12.

<sup>95</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, pp. 400ff.

<sup>96</sup> The Reformed tradition, following Zwingli, erected long tables down the centre of their worship rooms so that all could participate, sitting with their legs under the table. Nigel Yates, *Liturgical Space*, p. 48.

<sup>97</sup> Many Christians argue for Jewish unleavened bread or wafers. I argue for leavened bread which proclaims resurrection life and not Old Testament remembrance life.

which once boasted a vineyard, I am tempted to want to start that work again, but in the absence of our own vineyard, we at IBTS have made a compromise of taking our wine from Mikulov<sup>98</sup> in Moravia, where Balthasar Hubmaier, the great Anabaptist theologian, engaged in radical reform and where he worked on his liturgy of the supper and, most interestingly, the pledge of peace.<sup>99</sup>

Bearing in mind the injunctions of Paul to the Corinthians, I want to assert that the worship of the people of God on the day of Resurrection will certainly be festal and formed around the meal, but will not be such a hearty undertaking that gluttony will creep in.<sup>100</sup> It will live with paradoxes at the heart of Christianity and the life and ministry of Jesus.

I base an *ordo* for porous worship on a classic radical church or Anabaptist Sunday eucharistic gathering, but some things are naturally added and other things can be taken away.

- **Gathering and Greeting.** The gathering in the worship space will almost inevitably include the pleasantries of meeting for a banquet, but as this is a community of sharing, gifts might be brought, either to sustain the fellowship or contribute to the feast. Gathering could well include singing and conversation – the gathering songs from contemporary Christian communities such as Iona and Northumbria<sup>101</sup> and elsewhere are helpful; songs capable of being sung as one arrives, not requiring full and choreographed participation of everyone in the worship room, but designed to help people move to the focus of worship. And we will recall that our gathering baptistic communities, especially out of the Anabaptist tradition, developed theology, like the early church, through their songs and poems, and not as organised documents of faith. Our music should both take from the riches of the past, but also be formed by the contemporary expression of the community.
- **The Meal Begins.** Meals start with some form of welcome and narrative of why we are meeting together. In such a setting, adoration, invocation and blessing belong, together with singing, but this should not be too extended before bread is broken and passed around. Somehow in this gathering there will be the peace of recognition or the joy of meeting new people so that all feel included and embraced within

<sup>98</sup> On Mikulov, or Nicholsberg, see my article *Anabaptists in Moravia 1520-1620*, unpublished.

<sup>99</sup> Balthasar Hubmaier, ‘A Form for Christ’s Supper’, edited and translated into English by H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder in *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), pp. 393-408.

<sup>100</sup> 1 Corinthians 11.23-32, *The Bible New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: OUP, 1989).

<sup>101</sup> See [www.northumbriacommunity.org/](http://www.northumbriacommunity.org/) and [www.iona.org.uk/](http://www.iona.org.uk/), accessed 27 March 2012.

the community as the meal proceeds. Formal and informal ways of doing this can be found appropriate to the season, the life of the community and the presence of those 'on the edge'.

- **The Meal Proceeds.** Thanksgiving is offered.<sup>102</sup> When bread has been broken one with another, then the substance of the meal might be shared, but alongside the breaking of the bread, the breaking of the 'bread of life' takes place, both in the narrative of the story in scripture and also the breaking open of the word by appropriate and relevant conversation. Many a banquet is enhanced with good rhetoric, but it also requires stimulating conversation. I do not want to be prescriptive here and realise I live with the dilemma of enjoying good dissenting preaching, but also wanting to avoid the declaration of the word being 'six metres above contradiction'. Jesus encouraged dialogue and so must we. The question asked should lead to praxis – trying it out, applying the insight and developing the virtues and ethics. Breaking open the word without consequences in the community, and for discipleship, is fateful.
- **The Community and the World are Remembered.** You may say that this gathering, praising, breaking the Word and praying is not far removed from some contemporary liturgical forms. No, of course not. Good liturgical scholarship is getting us past atrophied tradition in an attempt to help us construct liturgies that both take from our roots and are relevant to post-modern communities. However, I am pressing for the centrality of the meal and communal reflection on the stories. This makes a significant difference.

The dissonant notes come in withdrawing from public worship in buildings formed for other civic realities and in going back to the setting of the banquet – the full meal, as the place where thanksgiving, eucharista, communion (*koinonia*) and remembering (*anamnesis*) – can be relevantly encountered. Most other discussions about worship, especially in our gathering church or baptistic communities, do not address these points. And at the heart of the meal and in response to the word, our focus will shift in both reflection and in prayer to the world we minister to. Here the community itself could well engage in the discipleship of binding and loosing.<sup>103</sup>

- **The Cup of Blessing is Taken.** Finally, having recovered the meal, there will be different thoughts on whether we have one prayer of thanksgiving before the bread is broken, or go back to earlier more

<sup>102</sup> I have set out a form of the Thanksgiving prayer I use recalling the mighty acts of God and the life of Christ in Shenk and Penner, *Anabaptism and Mission*, pp. 265ff.

<sup>103</sup> See John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992).

Judaistic forms of separate prayers for the bread and wine, but as the whole worship comes to an end the cup of blessing will surely be passed around and all receive from the one cup, sing a hymn or song and be dismissed from the fellowship for the life of mission and service in the world.

## Conclusion

In 2005 Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom wrote a book with the provocative title *Is the Reformation Over?*<sup>104</sup> That may be a question still being debated, but the radical reformation certainly is not. Indeed, it is an important reality in the contemporary reflection on Anabaptist insights.<sup>105</sup> This article has sought to stimulate reflection and debate on one of the foundational practices which shapes the life of gathering, intentional, convictional and missional communities of faith.

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<sup>104</sup> Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

<sup>105</sup> See, for instance, Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press 2010).

# **Journeys in Bangladesh**

Luke J. Heidebrecht

## **Prologue: The Context of the Trip**

The following journal is a reflection of my trip to Bangladesh that I took in requirement for a course entitled ‘Presence and Witness among Muslims’. The primary instructor for the course was David Shenk,<sup>1</sup> who has invested his life work in understanding and relating to Muslims, as well as practising Christian witness within various Islamic contexts. He has written several works related to the topic. The trip to Bangladesh was an opportunity that arose in conversation with David in an attempt to find a more integrated and pragmatic learning environment. David is currently serving with Eastern Mennonite Missions as a ‘Global Consultant’, which has led him to various Islamic contexts where he engages in dialogue, focusing on building understanding, peace-building, and witness of convictions. David invited me to journey with him on this trip as he engaged with both the Christian community through partnerships with Operation Mobilization (OM) and the Assemblies of God Churches, as well as the Islamic community in the locations we visited.

## **Tuesday, 18 October 2011**

What a wonderful beginning to our journey in Bangladesh! We have been greeted with kindness, hospitality, and invitation by our hosts: Proshanta Kumar Roy, who is the senior pastor at the Maran-atha Assemblies of God church in Faridpur; Suresh Roy, who is one of the lead organisers of OM mission in Bangladesh; and Phil Bushell, who is a long-term missionary working with OM. Already, we have been appreciative of their work in arranging our travel, accommodation and sessions.

Today Suresh and the OM group are hosting myself and David. This first session included both missionary workers with OM connections and local church workers, many of whom were former Muslims. In total, fifty or sixty were present and brought a wonderful energy and attentiveness to the seminar. David’s approach was to explore obstacles and opportunities in our witness among Muslims. In order to focus this exploration David used Revelation 3:7-13, which speaks about the church in Philadelphia. The questions surrounding this passage that David asked were; ‘why was the door open for the church in Philadelphia?’, and, ‘what can we learn from

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<sup>1</sup> David Shenk is an IBTS Adjunct Faculty Member.

this as it relates to the churches in Muslim contexts?’ Eight points were highlighted from this passage; these points being convictions that the church in Philadelphia lived out. The following are my observations.

First, Philadelphia means ‘brotherly love’ (v7). The challenge being: a church that loves each other and, in this context, extends this love to their Muslim brothers and sisters is beginning in the right spirit. Love is not fearful; love leads us to engage in relationship with others. God’s love as embodied in Christ is the foundational motivation of the church’s missional calling towards Muslims. Walking towards others in love and pointing to where that love comes from is an essential aspect of our witness. In the gospel of Luke, the parable of the Good Samaritan is a wonderful example of brotherly love enacted (Luke 10:25 – 37). Within the parable, as Jesus engages in a conversation regarding love with an expert of the law, we witness the experts desire to find a programmatic approach to love. The expert’s understanding of love is conditional to those he knows and can define as his neighbours. Sadly, he misses the point of who his neighbour is. His approach to ‘justify himself’ and define ‘who is my neighbour’, is not what Jesus points to in the parable. Rather, Christ highlights three peoples’ (Priest, Levite and Samaritan) approach to an understanding of ‘neighbour’ and changes the question from the definitive ‘*who* is my neighbour’ to become ‘which of these three *became* a neighbour’.<sup>2</sup> The definitive and categorical forms of understanding our neighbour are replaced with an understanding that we are to pursue *neighbourliness* and *become* neighbours where there is the need. This concept of love is something that compels us to become neighbours with the Muslims within our context, which is, of course, the first step in the proverbial opening of the door.

Secondly, the church in Philadelphia did good deeds (v8). These good deeds open doors to relationships. Good deeds tend to invite interest and response. Hospitality, service, care-giving, social development, and working for peace and justice are public aspects of the churches witness among Muslims. The church’s involvement *within* public places does not stem from a sense of duty but rather from the heart of compassion and desire to see genuine community grow. In Matthew’s gospel, particularly the beatitudes, Jesus teaches about good deeds in relationships with others. These beatitudes represent, not the ideals of an inner spirituality, but rather the recognition of qualities that are already present in the believer who is living out these relational ethics.<sup>3</sup> Doing good deeds with integrity is an

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), pp. 284-297. I have been inspired by Bailey’s approach to both biblical interpretation and cultural analysis. His work, especially this specific book, has formed much of my underlying theological reflection.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 65-87.

essential aspect of Christian witness. Kenneth Cragg echoes the importance of this aspect of Christian witness and states, ‘the loving compassion within their skills, working with Christ, is part of the meaning, and impact, of the kingdom of heaven. It exemplifies the gift and character of him who said: ‘I am among you as one who serves’. The spiritual meaning of salvation is discovered in its earthly incidence.’<sup>4</sup>

Thirdly, the church in Philadelphia had little strength (v8). In the way of worldly weakness God’s power is manifest in amazing ways. The way of power in this world may seek to find peace, but by enforcing peace and carving out niches of peace. Rather, Jesus’ peace is not the peace of the world; he did not seek to enforce peace on others but to offer peace through forgiveness and invitation. As we read in Revelation 5:6, it is not the Lion who is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals but rather the Lamb, ‘looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre before the throne’. The position of weakness especially opens doors in Muslim/Christian relationships as it embodies a position very different than that of Islam and the model of Muhammad. In many ways this is one key area of theology and practice where the two faith communities walk in opposite directions. In David Shenk’s book, ‘Journeys of the Muslim Nation and Christian Church’, he highlights this aspect of power in a chapter comparing the *Hijrah* and the Cross. David states, ‘The cross is about the nature of power’.<sup>5</sup> Christian witness must embrace this very Christ-like approach to power: walking in the opposite spirit of the world’s norms will open the doors further.

Fourthly, the church in Philadelphia kept the Word (v8). They were people of the book who understood that standing on the scriptures as the authority of the church opens doors to witness. Faithfulness to scripture is an essential part of Christian witness, particularly within an Islamic context. As 2 Timothy 4:2-3 states, ‘preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.’ In Christian witness it is essential to hold to the teachings of scripture as a community and seek the guidance of the Spirit, lest we deviate from the message of the good news of Christ. The Bible in its entirety clearly points to Christ and is the fullest revelation of his incarnation, life, death and

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 198. This book also forms a sort of theological backbone for my journals. David Shenk personally suggested this book to me as an essential voice to accompany me on my journey.

<sup>5</sup> David Shenk, *Journeys of the Muslim Nation and the Christian Church* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 2003), p. 141.

resurrection. Faithful witness among Muslims demands that we keep to the word. David notes, ‘around the world the assumption of the Muslim *Ummah* is that the Bible is not trustworthy scriptures’.<sup>6</sup> This fact alone should motivate Christians all the more to stand on our scriptures and find creative ways to respond to these questions which open doors to conversation to correct these ideas that have developed.

Fifthly, the church in Philadelphia did not deny the name of Jesus (v8). In close connection with keeping the word, the church is commended for not denying the name of Jesus, and this opens doors. As Jesus is our centre, a faithful witness must focus on him. In Muslim contexts denying the name of Jesus closes all the doors to witness. Peter the apostle understood the depth of this truth because of his own denial of Christ before his crucifixion. However, as Peter later proclaims before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:10-12, ‘It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed’. Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected which has become the cornerstone’. David’s approach to witness never deviates from a focus on Jesus. In all of his stories of encounters with Muslims David proclaims the foundation of his joy and purpose of his witness, which is Jesus Christ.

Sixth and seventhly, the church in Philadelphia was patient and willing to suffer (v10). These two aspects of witness emerge through commitment to a life lived with Christ. The journey of discipleship is not always a journey of immediate gratification but rather a patient journeying alongside others and a commitment to developing lifelong relationships. It is an expectation that this journey will bring about suffering, especially as followers of Jesus. Paul writes to the Philippians in 2:6-8 a reminder that Christ’s way is the way of the servant, which we are to model in our relationships with others, and that we are to ‘have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!’ Walking in this spirit in our witness to Muslims will open doors. The commitment to patience and willingness to embrace suffering as a part of the journey is such a counter-cultural and radical posture to live.

Finally, the church in Philadelphia is part of the New Jerusalem (v12). The New Jerusalem is the Church and in regards to Christian witness

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

our commitment to the body of Christ grounds us in a community of grace, which is for all people. The invitation to become a part of the family of God is an essential aspect of witness, which is embodied in the Church. Galatians 4:26-29 states, ‘so in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.’ David emphasised that Christian witness must flow out of the church and call people back to the church as the body of Christ.

As I have reflected again on these points I am struck with the holistic and integrated nature of witness. These few practices are by no means exhaustive of all the potential aspects of witness but are wonderful pointers towards owning and embodying some of the key aspects of our faith in Christ. My hope is that those who attended this session found encouragement to root their witness of faith in Jesus and exhortation to seek the guidance of the spirit in those aspects of witness that require us to walk with a bold humility.

## **Thursday, 20 October 2011**

As David and I have interacted with different people in Bangladesh, in particular the foreign workers, I have been intrigued to hear about the challenges and difficulties that they encounter. Two things have struck my interest:

One challenge that I observed in ministry here is the insider movement. From my limited understanding of the complexities of this movement I have gathered that it is an approach to accepting Christ as saviour, as well as some of the key aspects of the Christian faith, while continuing certain aspects of Muslim practice, such as continuing to attend the Mosque and participate in the *Fatiha*. This way of following Christ affects those believers who have a Muslim background and are caught within the tension of living between two beliefs, and often two social systems. There seems to be varying degrees to which these believers ‘expose’ their Christian beliefs and the question that arises is whether this is an honest witness to Christ and his all inclusive call to follow him.

As I have thought about this challenge for Muslim background believers in this context I have also been challenged in my own practice of faith within my context in North America. I appreciate encountering believers in other parts of the world and observing the challenges that they face because it becomes a mirror for observing my own faith. The

challenge for me, then, is to not approach these new issues as someone claiming objectivity and seek theological deconstruction, but to first allow these challenges to expose my own presuppositions. In allowing this exposure to happen I hope that I can find some solidarity with my brothers and sisters in Bangladesh, realising my own faults in this area.

Also, as I have thought about the concept of an insider movement, I have realised that the same temptation exists in the North American context. Amidst the pluralism, which is so prevalent, which tells me to keep my faith claims to myself and within the private sphere of my life, I am challenged to examine my faith walk and ask whether I revert to being an 'insider' too. Do I allow the claims of Jesus to compel me to witness in a more holistic and especially public way? I think this is also one of the key struggles of the Christian faith in my context at home. So, as I approach my brothers and sisters in Bangladesh, I hope first that I can approach their challenges in the recognition that we all need the help of the Spirit in our lives to allow us to live out the joy and love of Christ in unique ways within our cultural contexts.

I believe a starting point in the debate of the insider movement is the concept of convictions.<sup>7</sup> I was challenged as David Shenk spoke about the five pillars of belief and the five pillars of duty of Islam, that in its very nature, if you are to be a devout Muslim, you must be driven by convictions. Belief and duty go hand in hand as the two walls holding the Dar-al-Salam together.

How then does one respond as they move towards Christ? I think there are two possible approaches to this response. One is seeing it as an act of conversion. If someone sees conversion as the end goal, each new belief and practice can be seen as an alternative choice to the old. This approach may compel someone to ask questions about what they believe and how they want to enact that belief but may fail to root the belief itself in their heart as a conviction. However, if one approaches the response to Christ as a commitment to discipleship, then beliefs and practices are not to be approached in a comparative way. Rather, a disciple of Christ is first convicted by Jesus' own love and grace and seeks to own these values in his or her life; out of these convictions a follower of Christ continues to ask, 'how then do I live?'.

As I think about David's teachings on a Christian response to Islam I realise that the questions Muslims ask him about his faith are not necessarily questions that he seeks to answer directly. I realised that David

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<sup>7</sup> James Wm. McClendon and James M. Smith, *Convictions* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994). This book has formed my basic understanding of the idea of convictions as I use it here.

sees these questions as open doors that give him opportunity to witness to Christ. His approach to witness is grown out of his deep convictions that Christ is our centre. I have been challenged by this approach and I hope it has been equally challenging and helpful for our Muslim background believing brothers and sisters.

## Friday, 21 October 2011

It has been a wonderful two days in Rajshahi. David Shenk and I have spent quite a lot of time here with a team: Jacob and Hosanna Thomas, Mitch and Linda Trusty, John and Jan Thorpe, as well as Jacob's father and mother Paul and Karin Thomas. We felt blessed to have been included in their daily work and life here and it has truly been a privilege to observe their ministry and especially the relationships they have cultivated. Here are a couple of highlights from our time with them:

Meeting the team the first day and hearing snippets of their involvement in ministry. I especially appreciated the diversity of interests and approaches to ministry within this group; they have found unique ways of integrating into the fabric of this city.

The teams' hospitality has been a real blessing. I am sure I can speak for David that we have both felt welcomed and cared for. We are grateful for the arrangements in travel, accommodation, and meals that the team has made for us and recognise the sacrifice of work time they have taken out of their schedule to host us.

On Thursday, 20 October, a highlight experience was our boat ride on the Ganges River with Jacob and his two children, Elias and Maia. We visited the *Mazar* (shrine) of Shah Makhdum; a legendary Muslim *Pir* (holy man) who, according to legend, rode up the river to Rajshahi on the back of a crocodile! He is buried along with his crocodile near the river and is now venerated by Sufi Muslims.<sup>8</sup> Our boat ride was wonderfully relaxing and it was great to hear from Jacob of the various ministry opportunities and challenges he has encountered here in Bangladesh.

The following day, Friday, 21 October, we were in top gear preparing for a special wedding ceremony, which the team was organising for their friends Tipu and Bithi. This was a unique wedding for everyone involved, as it was the first marriage between two believers, both from a Muslim background. It was a wonderful opportunity to speak about the

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Wisdom of the Sufis* (Mount Jackson: Axios Press, 1976). Being intrigued by our visit to this *Mazar* I found this book to be a helpful guide to understanding more fully Sufi belief and practice. Cragg includes many stories, poems and sayings from various Sufi sources, which I found to be reminiscent of the Psalms and Proverbs and quite beautiful in their own right.

concept of discipleship and the team discerned together the value of teaching about the covenant of marriage in Christ within a community of Muslim background believers who have not had opportunity to experience marriage in this way before. For myself, it was wonderful to see how the team worked together to discern how to communicate these Christian values of marriage and in many ways 'shape' the theology and practice of marriage ceremonies for this community in the future. I am astounded sometimes at the weight of the tasks that people in various ministries can find themselves in. The responsibilities of discipleship that our Lord entrusts to his people are an empowering and, at the same time, a humbling calling. It was amazing to see this team along with the community of believers walk with the guidance of the Spirit in this process.

During the wedding David had a chance to meet with a man named Tariq Chacha, a local evangelist and someone who the team connected with early in their ministry here in Rajshahi. Tariq's story began in Dhaka where he became a believer in the early 1970s through connections with OM. He moved to Rajshahi soon after and began a business with the intention of reaching out to this community and establishing churches. Paul Thomas (Jacob's father) was working in the area at that time and came into contact with Tariq as he was looking for someone to mentor him in his ministry. Today, Tariq is an essential part of this team and their ministry connections within the city. Many of the local fellowships began because of Tariq's witness to the community in the past. As I listened to his story it was good to hear how God's hand was at work connecting Tariq with this team early in their work here.

## **Saturday, 22 October 2011**

We wrapped up our time in Rajshahi by spending the morning and early afternoon at the Thomas' house in conversation. Again, I must emphasise that it has been a real blessing to be hosted by this team. I have been inspired by their commitment to the community: one conversation that struck me was about the group of male youths that Jacob works with. He was so proud of one of the boys who had really taken ownership of his faith convictions. This boy had gone down to southern Bangladesh with a group of boys for a conference on computer technologies. The boys were all put up in a hotel and, surprisingly, offered alcohol and prostitutes. Jacob told us that the boy he has been working with was really convicted not to partake in these things and stood his ground despite ridicule from the rest of the group. It is really encouraging to hear stories like that! I love hearing about how God is working in young people's lives! Discipleship is such an

integral part of ministry and I am privileged to hear how Jacob and Hosanna have pursued it with this youth group.

David and I left Rajshahi at 3:45 in the afternoon on a bus to Faridpur, a five-hour journey. As David and I were nearing our destination and experiencing difficulty knowing exactly where to get off, a young man beside us helped us find our way! Needless to say we arrived on time, safely, and were greeted by Proshanta. He invited us to meet with his family and have a late dinner.

This is an exciting time for us to be here in Bangladesh as Proshanta has just finished the first Bangla translation of David's book, 'A Muslim and Christian in Dialogue' and had a print run of 1000 copies made.<sup>9</sup> I am inspired at how God has been using this book as a tool for building understanding between Muslims and Christians and how God uses this simple step as a part of Christian witness. Proshanta shared his enthusiasm for having this resource available to begin conversations with his Muslim neighbours and mentioned that both Christians and Muslims do not approach each other to talk about faith related questions. This lack of transparency and open dialogue between the two communities has led to a general suspicion of one another, and so, this book seems like a wonderful tool to begin working on building understanding and peaceful relations.

As I have been reading through Kenneth Cragg's book, 'The Call of the Minaret', I came upon a chapter titled, 'The Call to Understanding'.<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of this chapter Cragg comments, 'No Christian thought about Islam... can properly start with querulous complaints about suspicion and ill will. It must resolve to surmount prejudice wherever found and brace itself to correct error, restrain bitterness, and dissipate antagonism. It begins simply with the will to understanding'.<sup>11</sup> He goes on to say that Christians are 'ambassadors of a person-to-person relationship' and being compelled by 'the Word made flesh', are called to engage in meaningful relationships with Muslim brothers and sisters.<sup>12</sup> I appreciate this perspective as a starting point for Christian witness. Ultimately, our interest in dialogue with Muslims is not simply academic and theological communication, but rather communication of our heart values that extends an invitation to relationship with one another. This act of understanding is an essential element of peace building, which I believe is cultivating the ground for the work of the Spirit.

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<sup>9</sup> Badru Kateregga and David Shenk, *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Cragg, *Minaret*, pp. 171-192.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.173.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.174.

## **Sunday, 23 October 2011**

This morning David and I met with Proshanta for breakfast. We were delighted to listen to his stories about the beginnings of the church here in Faridpur and his relationships with some of the Muslims in this area.

In this particular neighbourhood where the church is now built, Proshanta met with a lot of opposition when he was trying to establish a suitable location. He had mentioned that there was no problem while they were renting a space outside of the community for the church; however, when they entered the community and wanted to establish a church presence within the neighbourhood then persecution began. I found this to be quite interesting and immediately thought about the impact of Christian presence in a place, not only physically but spiritually. This neighbourhood, which has been influenced by Hindu and Muslim presence, is closed to the presence of Christ and I imagine these social misgivings they found themselves encountering were ripple effects of the deeper underlying spiritual tensions. Shortly after the land was purchased for the church, Proshanta encountered violent opposition in the form of threats to his life and the destruction of the church building.

As these threats multiplied and grew in emphasis Proshanta approached the local police station to seek their help in the situation. During one church service three officers were present to assess the situation and offer some protection. On that same day a group of young Muslim boys came inside the church wielding death threats but were unable to carry out their task because of the police officers' presence. However, they were seemingly unperturbed by the police presence and made their position quite clear that they would follow through if this church continued to gather. It came to a head when the primary antagonist gathered the Muslim community together to rally against the church, putting forth further threats and possibly inciting violent action. The police, whom Proshanta had been corresponding with, were well aware of the situation and sent seventeen officers to quell the situation. Thankfully, in God's grace, that particular uprising never came to fruition due to the efforts of the police officers.

Shortly after this event, that same antagonist who had led the rally became deathly ill and was admitted to the hospital. Proshanta and some members of the church, seeing this as an opportunity to reach out in reconciliation and forgiveness, went to the hospital to offer their prayers for this man. This simple and humble act of peace building meant so much for the relationships between the Christian and Muslim communities in this neighbourhood. This Muslim leader, after one month, became well and because of the care and compassion shown by the church members in the

face of fear and anger, peaceful relations have grown in this neighbourhood over the last twelve years.

What a story of Christian presence and witness among Muslims! I think it is amazing how God works through persecution and the faithfulness of the believers who did not renege on their commitment to bring the presence of Jesus to this place. I am truly blessed to have heard about the churches' work of non-violent reconciliation; especially towards the leader who had at first showed such hostility.

As our conversation continued, Proshanta shared regarding his position on the use of the Quran as a tool to witness. From my understanding of the conversation he uses the Quran as a bridge to build relationships with Muslims. Beginning with their holy book he hopes to gain their respect; this is due to his negative experiences in attempting to begin with the Bible. I appreciate that he wants to open doors to relationships with Muslims and has found some creative ways of using the Quran as a platform to point to Jesus and provide an opportunity to share his faith. David asked Proshanta during our discussion, 'How do you bridge the Quran to the Bible?' Proshanta replied that he uses the Quran simply because he wants to be given the opportunity to share more and create the foundation for further discussion with Muslims, and sees it as a way to build meaningful relationships where he can, then, in future visits, share more deeply.

While he wasn't particularly clear about how to bridge the differences, I really appreciate his focus on relationship. I am interested to hear if and how other believers use the Quran in this context as a bridge to relationship and finding out more directly how that leads them to share their witness to Christ. Proshanta also mentioned his dismay at how the Quran itself affirms the *Torat* (Torah), *Zabur* (Wisdom Books), and *Injil* (Gospels) as legitimate books and yet has found that Muslims don't respect them. The question about biblical corruption seems to be one of the key stumbling blocks in believers' witness in this context.

In the afternoon Proshanta had arranged a visit to a local Madrassa where we all met with the Imam and some of the teachers. They were incredibly hospitable and welcoming and even, more interestingly, were all very inquisitive about questions of faith! One of the teachers named Muhammad, seemed most interested in talking and asking questions, although mainly of a polemical nature. He made sure to let us know right from the beginning that they do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that they deny the crucifixion. After making this point he wanted to move towards the topic of biblical corruption and inform us that the Bible had been changed: using this argument as a basis for his reasoning that Jesus is

not the Son of God. His proof of biblical corruption seemed to centre on the fact that there are four gospels and, according to him, these gospels are all divergent of each other. David, in response, made sure to point out that this thought of corruption cannot be true and is, in fact, a lie.

I can see how this thinking about corruption can so deeply affect the foundations of a Muslim's response to Christianity; because they are people who regard their book as eternal and unchanged, that is the only form of authority that they know. This question requires a worldview shift; at least in the realm of understanding where and how we find authority. As Christians, we believe that Jesus is the *living* Word and that he *is* the Gospel. The Bible, through the witness of the four gospel writers, the prophets, and the New Testament letters to the churches reveals, in the fullest sense, who the living Christ is. Yet, we also believe that we find revelation through the Spirit, and so it is the Spirit speaking through the words of the scriptures as well as the lives of others who reveals Jesus in his fullness in the midst of our lives. The gospel is not as an autonomous book of laws and rules or something disconnected and detached from the reality of life. The living Word, Jesus, is such a radical concept within the Islamic worldview.

Another question this teacher asked was in regard to our belief about their prophet Muhammad. The way in which he phrased the question, 'Do you believe in the prophet Muhammad?', seemed to be a positionising statement that seeks one of two answers; either we believe and therefore are accepted or do not and are rejected. I was curious how David might respond to such a question. He didn't play in the arena set out before us, but rather used the question as an opportunity to open discussion and give witness to Jesus. David responded by affirming the fact that Muhammad abolished polytheism in Arabia and that was a good thing. However, he also said he did not appreciate that Muhammad chose to use the sword in his doing so. This, then, opened the door to present the way of Jesus, which is different than Muhammad's. Jesus' way is the way of sacrificial suffering for the sake of reconciliation; it was seen as the way of weakness in this world. Muhammad's way was to seek to control through the ways of power in this world; the isolation of authority within one particular worldview and language and the use of force in expansion and propagation.<sup>13</sup> I was struck with the way in which David used a 'closed' question to create space to dialogue further and present an opportunity for witness to Christ, where at first, it seemed as though there was none.

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<sup>13</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 211-235. Sanneh's chapter includes a remarkable comparison between the Muslim *Hijrah* or the migration to Medina and the Christian Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Our conversation at this Madrassa was somewhat abbreviated due to the fact that we needed to be at a Church service at 4:00 that afternoon. We were thankful for our time and left on a very positive note. Proshanta, as we were leaving, mentioned that he is so thankful for this open door into their lives and I was moved by the beautiful gesture of embrace that both he and the Muslim teacher had at the end of our time. The Church service we participated in that evening was a delight! Both David and I were amazed at how many young people attended, probably 75% of the church. It was wonderful to have fellowshipped with them and been given an opportunity to share.

In an already full day we had yet one more visit to make: another Madrassa on the other side of town. Proshanta had arranged this earlier and, once again, when we arrived we were met with kind hospitality. When the Imam arrived Proshanta introduced David and the book, 'A Muslim and Christian in Dialogue'. Again, it was received very well and in fact the Imam and a few others in the room with us were interested in reading and exploring the book. This meeting was more low key in regards to conversation than our earlier visit but, once again, it was a wonderful cornerstone in the formation of relationships with these Muslim neighbours. Proshanta, at day's end, expressed his thankfulness for having had these opportunities to connect with the Madrassas in town and begin working on relationships of understanding and peace building. I am glad to have been a part of this very special time in Faridpur and to have participated in some historical meetings between the Christians and Muslims here. I am also so glad that God is using tools, such as this book, as a means for opening the doors to relationships and witness.

## **Monday, 24 October 2011**

Today is a transition. Proshanta, David, and I head down to a town called Kaliganj to meet with a group of pastors and present a seminar on witness among Muslims. We arrived around noon and began the seminar at 3:00pm. This seminar included pastors and church leaders from what the Assemblies of God considers the South West region of the country. The capital of this region is a city called Khulna, which as I talked with the participants, is where the majority of them were from. It was a very lively group with a keen interest in learning how to witness to their Muslim neighbours. Interestingly, most of these pastors were of a Hindu or Christian background and a few had been former Muslims. David's presentation today consisted of much storytelling to begin with; examples of conversations he has had with Muslims or experiences he has had in other places in the world, which set the tone and drew people's interest.

One of David's teachings struck a chord with the group. He was speaking about the *Fatiha* prayer. In this prayer, which Muslims pray seventeen times a day, they ask, 'Oh God, show me the straight way!' This prayer stands in contrast to many Christian prayers because we know the straight way; it's Jesus! In John 14:6 Jesus says, 'I am the way and the truth and the life'. The Muslim *Fatiha* is such a profound yearning to find God's favour and invite his presence into their lives. David commented, 'We yearn that our Muslim friends might find the answer to their prayer'.<sup>14</sup>

Later in the session David recalled our visit to the Madrassa yesterday and the question the teacher asked us, 'do you believe in the prophet Muhammad?' He presented this question to the group to hear their response. Immediately, there were a couple of voices resounding 'No!' After this initial response the dialogue within the group seemed to grow; there was a particular energy about the conversation that made me think this is something they all encounter and have experienced personally. One thing which emerged that all agreed with is that they disrespected the fact that Muhammad married so many women. This fact seemed very important to them. Shortly afterward, David offered his response to the group, which is recounted above in the 23 October entry. What struck me again about his response was the ability to seek to direct the conversation in such a way as to give witness to Christ. Opening doors to further conversation is so essential in these dialogues, especially when confronted with positionalising questions. I think this response was very helpful for all to hear.

The remainder of the seminar focused on the development of Islam as a religion. David outlined the contextual factors in the construction of Islam and listed the major influences that shaped the Quran. 'This type of teaching', said David 'is of course not accepted by Muslim scholars'. He went on to comment that Badru Kateregga, with whom he wrote 'A Muslim and Christian in Dialogue', would not be happy about his presentation that highlights the fact that the context influenced and shaped Islam, because Islam, through Muslim eyes, is the eternal will of God and existed before the time of Muhammad. Muhammad himself was receiving an exact replica of the Mother of the Book in heaven. It is interesting to note that this type of contextual analysis and textual criticism works in a significantly different way within the Islamic worldview.<sup>15</sup> The Muslim understanding of authority is that God's revelation came through his eternal

<sup>14</sup> See Shenk, *Journeys*, pp. 207-221, for a chapter on the significance of prayer within the Muslim and Christian communities.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Rippin's book details much of the formation of Islamic belief and practice from a critical and historical approach. I found this book to provide me with a fascinating perspective on the effects of historical cultures, religions and traditions in the development of Islamic belief and practice.

word in the form of a book, which is the Quran. Within the Quran there seems to be built in a philosophy that discourages questioning this authority. It is fascinating to think about how much influence the Quran has had on not only Arabic culture but also the Islamisation throughout the world of other cultural groups. It would be interesting to study, especially here in a context so far removed from Arabia, how the Islamic worldview and the former ‘local’ worldview have compromised each other; surely there are many forms of syncretism in Islam for precisely this fact.

## **Tuesday, 25 October 2011**

Sitting through David Shenk’s seminars multiple times I have been digesting more and more of his teaching on Islam. Today his presentation of the Muslim *Ummah* and the Christian Church was an interesting comparative study.<sup>16</sup> Building on the theological presuppositions in Islam that revelation came in the perfect form through the Quran, the *Ummah*, which is the Muslim community, has been shaped with a similar sort of unquestioning spirit. David said, ‘Islam believes in being naturally good, not sinful’. Therefore, the *Ummah*, which is a representation of this human goodness, is in its essence a perfect community. It is a perfect representation of how humanity should live together and does not go astray. Muslims consider the *Ummah* to be a perfectly balanced community that gives witness to the nations out of its inherent perfection, challenging others to submit to the will of Allah thus represented therein.

Structurally, Islam constantly looks backwards to the time of Muhammad and the formation of the *Ummah* in its perfect state as a sign and model of the law. This position is strongly maintained throughout the Islamic world. Any faults or flaws within the community are denied as being truly part of the *Ummah* and are excused as external factors. Where there are political or economic problems Muslims will deny that these are a part of or because of the *Ummah*. I find this triumphalist thinking very hard to grapple with. David, when confronted by Muslims with this thinking about the *Ummah*, asks simply, ‘Where do we see this perfect community?’.

The Church, in contrast, is fully aware of its flaws and, in fact, sees itself as a community of sinners. The Church is an imperfect community indeed, but it is through this acknowledgement that we as members of the church body can enter into mutual confession of our sins and find God’s grace which saves us. Our confession is a part of our worship of God and is

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<sup>16</sup> See also Shenk, *Journeys*, pp. 223-239, as well as Kateregga and Shenk, *Dialogue*, pp. 78-84 and 177-183.

an essential aspect of our understanding of who God is. The Christian church looks ever forward as it is eschatologically focused on the coming of the Kingdom and seeks to give witness to that Kingdom here and now on earth. In a metaphorical example David explained that the difference is essentially that 'Islam perceives the *Ummah* as a schoolhouse that gives instruction to Muslims. Christianity perceives of the church as a hospital where we can find healing, grace, and forgiveness from our sins.'

Today in the seminar a man named John S. Biswas, who was a former Muslim, shared part of his life story. He was born into a Muslim family and tried to live a Muslim life. However, his father had more than one wife and he grew up frustrated with his family dynamic and stated that they never had peace. As he was growing older he went to the Imam at his local Mosque one day and asked him a question, 'who is the greatest holy man?' The Imam told him that it was Jesus! From that point onward he developed an interest in studying Jesus' life, which led him to read the *Torat*, *Zabur* and *Injil*. He discovered that the Bible talks about Jesus while the Quran talks about Muhammad. He respected Jesus' life much more than Muhammad's, especially given his family situation and Muhammad's multiple wives. John became aware of his sinfulness and developed an understanding of the peaceful kingdom Jesus talked about and so surrendered his life to Him. After embracing Christ as Lord John went back and told his Imam. Sadly, because of this his community became enraged and responded by burning his house.

Thankfully, John's wife did not leave him because she was a very pious Muslim woman and hoped to draw him back to Islam. Slowly they reconciled their relationship through seeing Christian counsellors together and out of this she also came to know and believe in Jesus! I was really struck by the struggles and challenges in John's testimony. Becoming a follower of Jesus in a context that is predominantly Muslim has so many personal challenges. However, I am also blessed by his testimony; seeing the way that God worked through him and his family. He shared further about how he witnesses to Muslims: he said that he always begins in relationship, so he will always invite strangers for tea and food and show such kind hospitality so that doors of respect and trust can be opened. He then said that he engages in conversation and first explains who Jesus truly is. John goes on to compare the Quran and the Bible, looking at the teachings of Jesus and those of Muhammad and how different they are. Although I found it difficult to catch all the intricacies of his understanding of witness, he presented a very relationally focused and Christ centred approach. It is wonderful to hear the stories of those within this context that

are struggling to find ways to approach their Muslim neighbours. I think John's testimony was an encouragement to the group.

After lunch David led an investigation of Sufi Islam. The basis for this movement he said 'is a desire to seek the blessing of God'. Sufism is an approach to Islam that includes the idea of intercessors who speak through a 'chain', Muhammad being the top link who is then able to communicate with God.<sup>17</sup> David shared a story of attending a Sufi pilgrimage in Somalia where he travelled with some Sufi Muslim friends to the tomb of a Sufi saint. Many Sufi saints are local Muslim heroes or miracle workers who have been venerated through traditions and stories; all these saints would trace their lineage back directly to the prophet Muhammad, which shows their line of authority. This is important in that each saint can act as an intercessor in the Sufi's quest to commune with God. There are diverse practices within the Sufi movement but common throughout are: belief that Abraham was a *wali* or a friend of God, that there are appointed intercessors between God and human beings, that we must remember the names of God so that we come close to God, and that there are signs that point us to God. Each Sufi seeks these pilgrimages to the tombs of saints so that they can become their 'Pathfinder' in their quest to know God. The *dhikr* is another spiritual practice of the Sufis, where they chant the names of God, often using drugs to incite a form of spiritual ecstasy.

'Why do they do these things', asked David? Ultimately, their quest is a search for intimacy with God; to know God is so meaningful that they have developed a whole form of Islam that is considered 'bad orthodox Islam'. It is a striking movement within Islam that points so directly to Jesus our intercessor. David remarked that Sufism is an open door to Jesus. He is the one who had no sin, who lived among us, and understands us. He is our 'priest forever, in the order of Malchizedek' (Hebrews 7:17). Sufi devotees in many ways reveal the deeper spiritual yearnings in Islam. Yet, they do not see Jesus and so create practices that differ in terms of finding a mediating intercessor. However, Jesus the intercessor offers freedom and fulfilment to the yearning to know God in a way that brings life.

## Wednesday, 26 October 2011

Today was a transition day as we moved from the seminars at Kaliganj down to Gopalganj. Interestingly, on this particular day the country had a transportation strike due to the rise of gas prices and so all public transit was stopped and no taxis were allowed to drive! Fortunately, the previous

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<sup>17</sup> See Shenk, *Journeys*, pp. 214-217.

day we had met two missionaries from the Huldaman Mennonites who happened to be coming through and heard about the seminar. They were heading home and one of them lived in Gopalganj, so offered us a ride! Thankfully, our travels were successful and we arrived without any problems.

David and I have been talking about the value of teaching the historical origins of the Islamic movement and the influences that helped shape it as a religion. I know in my own personal study I always appreciate understanding the impact of context. In fact, in most studies, contextual analysis is something that gives strength to an argument or concept and fleshes it out. Christians are particularly interested in historical and contextual study because that is how God has revealed himself to humanity, through particular people in particular places and times. Our study of scripture naturally leads us to a study of the context in which the stories and experiences were written and we find that this breathes life and reality into a sometimes distant text. I have personally found that cultural and contextual Bible study has enriched my understanding of the text and shaped in me a greater appreciation for how God has chosen to speak to his children throughout history.

Conversely, Islam resents this sort of historical criticism and finds that it is ‘un-valuable’. Muslims stand on the idea that revelation happened perfectly through the Quran and that this revelation is timeless. This staunch commitment to divine revelation has a sort of ‘mystical’ or unapproachable quality to it. Islam stands on the Quran as a theoretical miracle but refuses to seek out the context in which this miracle happened lest, by chance, it should be invalidated. As I have witnessed in our seminars, this idea of mysticism surrounding much of the development of Islamic faith and practice bleeds over into the other religions that interact with Islam. Most Christians here in Bangladesh simply do not know and understand the historical origins of Islam and so teaching about these very things is a way to ‘de-mystify’ Islamic religion. It allows believers to approach Islam with a much greater understanding of its influences, so that, hopefully, they may then interact with Muslims with a greater awareness of why they hold the worldview that they do. I really hope that this type of study creates a greater sympathy in our hearts as Christians as we approach witness among Muslims and reveals windows of opportunity to connect relationally and speak truth into their lives. There were at least a few participants who approached me after this particular portion of the seminar and told me how much they had appreciated it.

Tomorrow will be my last full day with David. He and Proshanta will be travelling North to a town called Rangpur to do one more day-long

seminar. Unfortunately, the way my flight schedule was arranged will not leave me enough time to attend that seminar and include all the travel times. I will miss my travelling companions and have been so very thankful that I have had the opportunity to share in this experience with them!

## Thursday, 27 October 2011

The final day is here! These seminars thus far have been simply wonderful! There has been a very positive response from the participants both during and after the presentations. There are many questions being asked and an eagerness to learn about new approaches to situations they have all personally encountered. It has been a real treat to sit with the different groups and learn with them. I have gained much out of listening to David's seminars multiple times and, within each new context, the various questions highlight certain aspects of his teachings in a way that makes them relevant and vibrant. I have especially enjoyed observing the church leaders and their enthusiasm to witness within their respective villages in this Islamic context; it is very inspiring!

Something that has emerged out of the seminars, particularly today, has been a desire from some of the participants to find easy or rebuttal-type answers to questions Muslims ask Christians. As David has taught once again about the context in which Islam developed, many of the participants realised that there are very logical arguments that could be formed using this information to debunk Islam in a variety of ways. Here, the temptation to witness takes on the form of 'I'm right and you're wrong, and seeks to prove that Christianity is a more valid religion than Islam. I think this is a very natural way of approaching witness, partly due to the fact that we want to know for ourselves that what we believe is true; and provably so. There is a stream of thinking that says; if we can prove to Muslims that their faith is based on invalid information or that if they examine critiques of their religion they might find Christianity a better alternative.

One example that arose during the seminar that clearly shows this paradigm of witness is seen in the question, 'is there any historical or archeological proof that it was Isaac and not Ishmael that was sacrificed?' Now, as David has been teaching about the development of Islam and its approach to witness I realised that this form of polemical witness is the form of witness that Islam embodies. Kenneth Cragg in 'The Call of the Minaret' helped me understand why this is so. Within the foundational Muslim creed, the *Shahada*, 'There is no God except God'; the root belief is a polemic approach to faith. Cragg states, 'it is clear from the negative

form of the Muslim creed... the Prophet's mission was not to proclaim God's existence but to deny the existence of all lesser deities'.<sup>18</sup>

Understanding this, it is wise to take into account the natural tendency of Islamic witness and not allow the polemical default to dictate our responding forms of witness. In fact, I think because the Islamic witness is so polemical in nature, it is our task to be all the more discerning and creative in our witness so that we do not close all the doors and create relational divisions. Tension between the Muslim and Christian communities exists because of many historical attempts to force a witness upon one another. Cragg calls for an 'increasing respect for the dignity and the sensitivity of the other' in our witness.<sup>19</sup> He makes clear that evangelism must take into account the religious histories of the respective communities and that 'evangelism insensitive to these considerations may easily become counterproductive... witness must be positively *within* participation'.<sup>20</sup>

This participation, as I have seen it here in Bangladesh, compels Christians to enter into the lives of Muslims and intentionally become neighbours with those in their communities. I think that at the heart of our witness to Muslims is the ability to rephrase the polemic questions, in the same way that Jesus did with the Jewish Pharisees, lawmakers and experts. The questions, instead of creating the potentials for a positional response are rather an open door to a dialogue. The aim of witness in many ways is in our ability to open that door a little further, to put our foot in the door and ask to be invited in. If, as Cragg suggests, 'the Muslim sees Islam as correcting Christian "distortion" of Jesus and of God', then the call to witness is a responsibility to retrieve the true awareness of whom Jesus is.<sup>21</sup> 'Here', Cragg says, 'we are not concerned with refutation; only with the measure of unawareness. We must avoid the easy temptation to vindication... here is a tragedy to be redeemed. What matters is not that Muslims have thought ill of Christianity but that they have misread the Christ.'<sup>22</sup> I find that a very compelling responsibility in my witness among Muslims. It challenges me to think about my motives for witness; is it about assuring myself of my beliefs and commending my religion to another or is it about offering the relationship of Jesus that I have been given to the other?

The challenge to understand how to approach Christian witness has been at the core of what I have learned on this trip. David has shown a

<sup>18</sup> Cragg, *Minaret*, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 206-207.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 218-220.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

wonderful example of a very bold yet humble approach to witnessing to Christ Jesus. He often used 1 Peter 3:15 as an example of a biblical approach to witness. It says, ‘But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.’ I can only hope to continue to learn how to embody these attributes as I journey in my faithful witness as a follower of Jesus Christ.

## **Epilogue: Thoughts after the Journey, 14 February 2012**

It has now been nearly four months since my departure to Bangladesh. Reading the journal entries again I am struck with a few thoughts as I look back on my experiences. Reflection is a powerful tool for learning. I have realised that at least a part of the nature of the learning process is remembrance and reinterpretation of thoughts, ideas and experiences. As I re-read my entries I am remembering and further digesting some significant events that shaped my thoughts at the time within the specific context I was in. These journal entries were a reflection, in context, on the events and experiences I was encountering. They were my attempt to name and shape, in an applicable way, the things that were most significant for me. Having been out of this context for some time now I am again remembering what I deemed to be significant in my process of learning. Now, I find myself looking at ways to reinterpret my initial thoughts and ideas in such a way that they become applicable not only to the context of my experience but also to any and every context. I have two points of note.

First, looking back at the entries I notice a tendency to paint a very positive approach to the way of witness I perceived David and Cragg espousing and a rather negative picture of Islamic witness as polemical by nature. Ironically, I realise that this very posture and attitude is itself polemical and I have in some ways fallen prey to, potentially, an overly positivistic and idealistic view of Christian witness. I realise the contextual nature of the act of witness itself and was blessed to have learned firsthand from someone (David Shenk) who has embodied a rich and refined approach, honed over his lifetime involvement in such a variety of contexts. My attempts to reinterpret his perspectives on witness are in many ways a faint shadow based on my observations and my own life experiences, which are far less vast and varied. Recognising my own contextual biases is something I am learning to navigate as I refine my approach to Christian witness.

Secondly, I have been ruminating on the purpose of the course. The title itself, ‘Presence and Witness among Muslims’, uses the dual

terminology of presence and witness. I am beginning to understand the significance of these two terms and their intentional pairing. I am interested in the fact that this course is not titled ‘Witness among Muslims’. The addition of the term presence, for me, implies relationship, or at very least entering into a relationship. Christian presence, in essence, is a form of the incarnational presence of God. If Christians are called to be ambassadors of Christ (1 Corinthians 5:20) their very presence is an essential component of witness. In fact, the mission of Christ’s followers is to be present and to witness. Christopher Wright notes the importance of the thread of continuity in God’s mission and the mission of God’s people. He notes that mission begins with God’s election of Abraham to both *go* to the nations and *be a blessing*.<sup>23</sup> This dual thrust seems to capture the essence of God’s mission, which finds its parallel in the Great Commission text in Matthew 28:16-20. In this text Jesus imparts the same missional responsibilities to his followers: both to *go* and *make disciples*. I see a comparison here in the dual terms of presence and witness. Presence, by nature, must assume that I go and involve myself in the lives of others, and witness, holistically defined, is part of the process of being a blessing and making disciples. In a sense, this course has helped shape not only my understanding of presence and witness within an Islamic context but also my growing understanding of the Mission of God and what that means for me.

I am thankful to have had this opportunity to travel with David and learn in such a tangible way. We not only talked about but also practised a presence and witness of Jesus. I am thankful for all the insights that I have taken away from this experience and the value of this journal and reflection. Even after a few short months, when returning to these journals, I find myself being critical of my own ideas, which I suppose, is the value of the ongoing journey of learning.

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<sup>23</sup> Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), pp. 191-264. Wright is working out a theology of the mission of God’s people from Genesis 12:1-3.

## Book Reviews

### ***Building Bridges Between the Orthodox and Evangelical Traditions***

*Tim Grass, Jenny and Paul Rolph and Ioan Sauca (eds.)*

WCC Publications, Geneva, 2011, 268 pages.

ISBN 978-2825415535

The book under review engages with consultations between Christian traditions which apparently lie on two opposite sides of the Christian family, Orthodox and Evangelical Christians. First, two introductory essays lead us into the history of theological encounter between two Christian groupings who have more recently come to the ecumenical table. The dialogue was provoked by the experience of the World Council of Churches Assembly in Canberra (1991) and followed by consultations identifying areas which need to be further developed.

This initiative was continued at seminars arranged by the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, Switzerland, from 2000 to 2006. *Building Bridges* contains the main presentations, reports and group conclusions from these Bossey seminars; its chapters mirror the themes of four meetings: salvation, the role and place of the Bible, the nature and purpose of the Church and what it means to be human. There are fourteen contributors in this book; all are prominent scholars and university professors from both sides of the Christian spectrum, mostly coming from Romania, the UK, the USA and Greece. Each chapter has a strict structure: two presentations from Evangelical and Orthodox speakers from their perspective (an Orthodox or Evangelical point of view) on the topic, concluding with summary reports from workshops that followed.

It is evident from the contributions that the contributors do not represent their traditions but reflect their own experience. Therefore the titles of the presentations, for example 'from an Evangelical perspective' or 'from an Orthodox perspective', are unnecessarily misleading since they do not provide an official position of a particular Christian tradition on an argued topic, but rather a perspective of a particular scholar. This personal involvement is visible in all the contributions, which are much more than profound theological studies; they are personal witnesses and testimonies showing that the Bossey consultations were a transformative experience, overcoming fears, prejudices and accusations.

All four topics (soteriology, Bible, ecclesiology and anthropology) are examined in detail and attempt to address the main themes within these areas; at the same time they are structured in such a way that they initiate

dialogue and comparison with the other tradition. It is not an exception that an Evangelical writes and discusses *theosis* or Stăniloae, or that the Orthodox agree with the view of Evangelicals. It seems as if all were surprised at how strong the prejudices were and that actually the similarities were much more numerous than they had ever expected.

This collection of essays is a remarkable combination of theological precision, spiritual depth and personal witness. Building bridges is a powerful metaphor; it is a witness to the fragility of the relationship, since bridges can be very easily taken down. Therefore, the most important message of the book is not a mutual comparison of Evangelical and Orthodox tradition and theological themes, but the self-criticism that arose out of this comparison.

This book is highly recommended both for those who want to learn about the other tradition, and for those who want to learn about their own tradition.

**Zdenko Š Širká**  
Head Librarian, IBTS

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### ***Multi-voiced church***

*Stuart and Sian Murray-Williams*

Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012, 149 pages.

ISBN978-1-84227-766-9

The main argument put forward in this helpful book by the Murray Williams' is that the early church was a multi-voiced church and that we need to recover this characteristic for our churches today. Over time, the move from churches meeting in domestic settings to larger spaces such as halls and lecture rooms, lead by professional clergy, who often marginalised the gifts of the Spirit, caused the change from multi-voiced to mono-voiced church. Documenting the rise and fall of protest movements in church history provides a helpful and challenging backdrop for the church today as we seek ways to become and sustain multi-voiced churches.

The book itself is multi-voiced in that it includes contributions from others writing of their experiences, both positive and negative, of developing multi-voiced church. Being a multi-voiced church is one of E1 Community Church's key distinctives and so the chapter that I found particularly helpful defined multi-voiced worship and the different ways that it can be worked out. Stuart and Sian point out the need for on-going

learning, experimentation and the establishment of ground rules for being multi-voiced, which helped me to recognise that being multi-voiced is something that our church will have to continually work on and wrestle with. I particularly liked the idea of developing a community liturgy and the significance of recognising the 'liturgical journey' that worshippers go on together. The balance must be found between giving freedom for people to contribute during the worship event and the need for order, space to listen, and reflection. 'Deep worship is not a grazing time, but involves feasting with Christ.' (p. 59) This is what I would hope to facilitate, inspire and encourage as a pastor.

Multi-voiced church goes beyond multi-voiced worship and there are chapters on multi-voiced learning; multi-voiced community; discernment and decision-making, with similar arguments from the early church put forward. The role of leaders in multi-voiced churches is considered and the authors encourage pastors to consider how they lead or have been trained to minister in light of the challenge to be multi-voiced church. Finally the mission of the church and the attractiveness (not attractional-ness) of multi-voiced church, in which members participate fully and actively is considered.

Most significant for me, is the authors' assertion that 'multi-voiced worship depends on the vitality of the spiritual life of the worshipper... it is a barometer of the spiritual life of a church in a way that mono-voiced worship can never be'. (p. 62) The authors argue that active participants in healthy multi-voiced churches are much more likely to be confident in sharing their faith with others, in getting involved in social action, in opening their homes and being sensitive to the needs of others, than those who are passive consumers of church. I believe that the power of people's testimonies is what attracts people to faith: particularly in the inner city where many people struggle with huge challenges in their daily lives. The testimony of who Jesus is in the midst of those struggles, both for individuals and as a community of believers, has immense power.

This book is timely and challenging, with many pointers and questions to consider. Creating and sustaining multi-voiced churches will be full of joy, risk and disappointment but the journey must be taken and should be travelled together with others committed to this vision of the church.

**Alexandra Ellish Alexander**  
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